Vir Bor'assan

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Vir Bor'assan

by ChampionOfThedas

Summary

Vir Bor'assan, The Way of the Bow
Bend, but never break

After his sponsor's betrayal, Will finds himself trapped by expectation, by perception, and by Templars. With threats of execution, lifelong imprisonment, the Rite of Tranquility, and Chilton hanging over his head, the young elf has to make the best of a bad situation. He's not the only one. The Seekers are reeling from the aftermath of five murders allegedly committed by him and are trying to cope with what that means for them individually. All the while, Hannibal is renegotiating his game and Abigail Hobbs finds herself stuck in the same patterns over and over.

08/24/24 HIATUS WITH THE INTENTION TO FINISH, SEE SERIES NOTES FOR DETAILS.

Ir tel'him

Chapter Summary

> "Without an end, there can be no peace. It gets no easier. Your struggles have only just begun." - Flemeth

Chapter Notes

> Ir tel'him: I am me again.
>
> 08/31/24: Not yet edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Comte Lecter was delighted to finally enjoy company at his own table after a month of travel. Granted, he had merely a few days to settle down and make his table fit for company, but the noble was not too concerned by its overall quality. After all, Seeker of Truth Jack Crawford was an easy man to please. It was unfortunate that Bella was too ill to accompany him.

His home in Val Royeaux was without a doubt Hannibal's favorite. While smaller than his estate in Red Crossing or the one now in Verchiel, it had a certain style that he was favorable too. What also helped was its proximity to the heart of the Grand Game and allowing him a presence in the capital among his fellow nobles. They were a pesky lot, but if you were outside of the seat of the Empire and received the latest gossip by anything other than a bird from a trusted bard… you were out of date and out of fashion. For a player, that could be a death sentence or worse. It's true that there is more risk involved, but what is life without risk? It helped that he didn't feel like becoming overly involved with the minutiae of politics this summer round; he had a much more entertaining game to play.

Thus, Crawford's presence at dinner. Despite the fact that the Seekers and Will had left for the White Spire before Hannibal had, they still had only just arrived. According to rumors, Will was mostly unconscious for the journey, still receiving treatment from the Senior Enchanter Wynne for his illness and spirit/demon problems. They also were worried about the danger of allowing him to dream properly or spend a moment too long coherently. He had proven himself to be a threat even without magic. It was admittedly lucky for the both of them that they hadn't killed Will yet.

Rooting around for other news about Will would have to be done on his own. When Hannibal served the meal, Jack's eyes lit up like stars. He did experience a pang of regret that he could not feed Jack the lesser creatures of this world, having too little time in Val Royeaux and

none of the food gathered on the journey had held up this long. To his despair, he was left with fresh seafood and other light fare, pointedly chosen and arranged to celebrate the season.

“Beautiful,” Jack exclaimed at the elegant display. It was something that he had thrown together. “I almost feel guilty eating it.”

That was an opening that he couldn’t resist. “I never feel guilty eating anything.” It garnered a chuckle. It was time for him to hit so that he could achieve his goal for the meeting. “The last time I truly had such food was when I prepared this meal for my Aunt Mundari under similar circumstances.”

Jack’s face fell, became stone. “What circumstances were those?”

“A loss. This is a loss. Will is a loss and we are mourning a death.”

His dining companion looked away and took a few bites of food, unable to look him in the eyes. “This is my loss. Will’s death is on me and no one else.”

“Jack,” Hannibal began. “I was just as close if not closer to him. He confided in me on a regular basis and I did not see it. If it must be on you, then it is ultimately on the both of us.”

Jack scrubbed his hands against his face. “It’s the last thing I think about going to sleep and the first thing I think about when I wake up. Bella’s been trying to support me through this and the team is trying not to step on my toes, but all I can think about is how I am responsible for one murder even though Will is convicted of five.”

Curious. “You are not on trial.”

Another laugh was gained, but it was decidedly more bitter. “Perhaps not literally, but among my peers? Absolutely. Will was under my supervision when he did this and it was my duty to act sooner or at least more decisively.” He pointed a fork in Hannibal’s direction. “You should be careful too. He’s been making accusations, claiming that you were responsible for all five of the deaths.”

“I wonder where he got that idea.”

“You act nonchalant now, but the Lord Seeker is taking this very seriously. She wants to remove all collateral, even if it involves burning the forest down for the trees to grow. Lord Seeker Prurnell is not a forgiving nor a merciful woman.”

He smiled, eyes hidden behind his mask. “Will was not wrong until the moment that he was. I am glad that she is being thorough. It’s in my best interest and yours that the investigation is not swept under the rug.” They wouldn’t be able to find anything anyhow. All this would do is bring in more tension to the workplace, which he likes.

“Before he pointed in your direction, Will went mad. It was very public, might I add.”

“You cannot define Will by his maddest moments.”

Jack scoffed, looking betrayed. “We cannot define Will at all.”

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The White Spire wasn’t much of a change of pace, much as Lord Seeker Prurnell had claimed it would be upon his arrival. The first thing they did was drug him into unconsciousness, drain his mana and magic, then put him in a cell with rotating Templar patrols. The only new thing was the fact that Templars were guarding his cell and not Seekers. He could hear other people in the depths of the tower with him, but the distance between them rendered any attempt at communication to shouting.

He learned quickly that Templars don’t like that. While normally Will would not give a crap, when it meant being woken up with a kick in the head or without one, he would capitulate. For now. Honestly, they could learn some proper manners. It truly was no wonder that so many mages grew desperate and turned to blood magic or worse with protectors like these.

There were a few brief moments where Will allowed himself to drift off. It was a bit of risk because if he stayed that way too long, he fell asleep. With sleep came more demons than he had ever encountered before; it was like they were surrounding all of the mages here, just waiting for one to get a little weak and allow them in. If he faltered, they whispered to him, letting him know just how much help they could be and all of the power that they could give. Throughout his youth, the demons that typically visited him were those of Sloth and even Pride, but now he found a lot of Wrath (not necessarily Rage) and Desire demons… and a couple of Despair demons as well. They told them of the vengeance he would wreak and how it would take so little for him to get out of this place. It wasn’t as encouraging as they hoped, he was sure.

When he managed to close his eyes without going into the Realm of Dreams, Will found himself nestled in a basin between the snow-capped mountains of the Emprise du Lion. In his little oasis, there was a running stream, too gentle to really be a river, and boulders surrounding him from all sides. An aravel was behind him with two halla sleeping in the grass. It was among star-filled nights and restful days that he was able to find peace. In his imagination, he would go hunting every day and enjoy fruits and vegetables that he could scavenge. There was a small garden being cultivated inside of the aravel, just for him and his house partner: Abigail. She was a fixture in his thoughts. Sometimes, she was more animated than others. Some part of him prickled on the days where she sat brooding in her thoughts just as much as she did, but when they actually spoke, it was wonderful. There were a lot of apologies on both ends; when Will opened his eyes, he wished he would have been able to say them.

Unfortunately, those little pieces of time all for himself never lasted. Because he couldn’t actually afford to go to sleep, his brain had to remain fairly active. Any time that Frederick decided to be a particularly aggressive nuisance he was drawn out quickly. That was happening more and more lately, much to Will’s chagrin.

“What was that?” he asked, more than a little irritated about the interruption.

Opening his eyes reminded Will of where he was. After disturbing the other prisoners with one too many nightmares, they had moved him to isolation. It was very similar to the set up

they had in the Bastion, complete with bars between the interior of his cell and the door to allow someone the illusion of safety, should he have a visitor, and an extra layer between a rabid mage and the wary Templars outside of it. Will thought it was a bit much, but it was the White Spire. It was the largest Circle in Thedas, so he supposed that some paranoia about a rogue mage might be warranted. We wouldn't want an uprising on our hands, would we? There was one difference: this room had a cot and a chamber pot.

"I said when did you first realize that you were a mage, Will," Frederick drawled.

"Why do you care?" Will spat and tried to go back to his small rebellion.

"We need to know all we can about you, Will. You're very special." Will snorted, which made Chiton narrow his beady little eyes.

"I found out that I was a mage much like anyone else. I accidentally set a tree on fire." Frederick wrote down several notes about his little lie. In truth, Will didn't much remember not being a mage. As soon as he could remember his dreams, he heard spirits calling to him. Sure, his Keeper probably had a story that was very similar to his lie, but he wasn't going to give the High Seeker the satisfaction. Something must have shown on his face though, because when Chilton looked up from his notes, he sighed and put down the little book.

"Will, we are just trying to help you. If we can understand you better, this whole thing will be easier to handle. You might even get to live, which won't happen if you don't cooperate." Living, for what quality of life that would be. Tranquility, death, or Frederick's tender care. Those are all lovely options. There was a chance, however, that he could use this to his advantage. They wanted him to talk, so he would, but only to the one person that he needed to grab ahold of. If this was going to work, Will would need to keep careful control of himself. His natural empathy had never been good for much before, but maybe he could weaponize it. It would be nice to put it to use somewhere besides interpreting the will of spirits.

"I refuse to talk to you. I want to speak with Comte Hannibal Lecter."

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Jack was extraordinarily pleased to see that Alana was improving vastly in her abilities with the sword. She was a natural guardian, using her sword and shield in equal measure to block incoming attacks and direct them back at the enemy. Her training with Beverly had given her enough of the basics to hold her own in a fight, but under his own tutelage she blossomed. The Lady Bloom would very quickly become Dame Bloom at this rate. Even the most experienced chevaliers would become envious at her raw talent. All she needed was a bit more work at the finesse aspects of her weaponry. She, much like many others, saw the blade and board style of combat in one fashion, warriors charging headlong and blocking enemy blows to protect their allies. If she were to become truly great, she would need to recognize that her shield could easily become a weapon as well, should she care to utilize it in that manner.

Jack learned to fight and kill by playing dirty. He didn't like it, but it had been helpful on more than one occasion. Alana could play dirty, but only with certain parameters; she needed

help thinking outside of expectations. That's why she was still learning. Her heart was in the right place and she had already spent so much time with the Chant of Light prior that she could recite the most important Canticles from memory. Her progress was so far above the average novice that Jack was almost ready to put her through; there was just one more step that needed to be taken.

Of course, he couldn't say any of this to the Lord Seeker that was currently watching their sparring with neatly frustrated eyes. While Seekers were encouraged to think outside of the box, there was still an expectation of unquestioning loyalty to the Chantry first among all things. He… didn't approve of that idea so much. How was one supposed to be the watcher that kept out internal corruption if they were completely devoted to the organization and its leadership?

Jack brought his blunted sword a mere inch away from Alana's neck. "Yield," he commanded and she dropped her own. He turned to their Lord Seeker and gave a respectful salute, which was quickly mimicked by Alana. "What brings you to us, Lord Seeker Prurnell?" he asked, already having a feeling about where this was going.

"Seeker Jack Crawford, I am here because of your misconduct in the field."

He furrowed his brows. That wasn't how he thought she was going to phrase it. "Lord Seeker?"

She marched forward, plate armor gleaming in the summer sun. It was nearly blinding, the flames surrounding the eye of their order burning in the harsh light. Her shorn blonde hair had been bleached platinum by spending too much time with light reflecting off of jagged pauldrons, giving her the look of a holy warrior to many, a paladin of truth smiting with the Maker's fury. She certainly had the resolve and judgement of one. "Despite misgivings, we allowed you, a senior member of our order, to bring in a highly volatile mage for investigations. You claimed that you would have the situation handled." He didn't say anything. Arguing was pointless. "Now, five people are dead. How do you call that 'situation handled'?"

"We believe there were extenuating circumstances," he tried to explain, but she brushed through any excuses he had.

"These 'extenuating circumstances' came from the fact that he was a **volatile mage**. Had that not been the case, they would never have borne fruit. As a **senior member of the order**, it was your duty to either bring him in, cut him down, or monitor the situation more carefully than you clearly did."

Alana spoke up, despite Jack trying to hush her, "It was a delicate situation. Will was helping save lives!"

Lord Seeker Prurnell glared with her sharp grey eyes. "It is not a Seeker's job to save every single sad little person's life. It is our job to serve the Chantry and the Order against greater forms of danger. We save a lot more lives by keeping the Templars and Mages in check. This elf may have saved lives, he may have not. What he did do was kill five people, and you call this a delicate situation. I believe it is very straightforward."

Alana stared, disbelieving the attitude of the woman in front of her. Her eyes were so full of emotion and compassion, a trait that Jack admired, unlike the steel across from her. Something was being created here that might have consequences down the line, he was certain.

“There is going to be an inquiry to see if you are allowed to maintain your rank in the order, demoted, or dismissed. Consider this your warning.” The Lord Seeker left, both of the people she was ‘conversing’ with glaring at the empty space she was before.

“That’s the Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell,” Alana stated and questioned at the same time.

Jack sighed, exhausted from one simple conversation. “Yes she is. How about we stop for the day? I could use some rest.”

“Jack, she was threatening your position.”

He shrugged, “It wouldn’t be the first time. During my training, my teachers always thought I was too brash, too stubborn. I see what must be done and I do it, simple as that, damned what protocol and niceties dictate.”

His apprentice picked up her weapons and cleaned up their training space. “I think this mess is going to get ugly.”

Laughing, devoid of amusement, Jack replied, “It already is.”

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He had another dinner that very night. Alongside the one with Jack Crawford that made two in a row. To boot, he heard from one of the Friends of Red Jenny that Will asked High Seeker Chilton to allow Hannibal to speak with him; he was told that the young man was being highly uncooperative with the beady little man. Unfortunately, when he tried to access the White Spire, Hannibal was immediately turned away. Pity, Will had refused to speak with him at the Bastion beyond the simple greeting. It was only after twenty minutes of the two of them staring in stony silence that Hannibal left. Now Will wished to see him? This was a rather pleasant turn of events. He would need to see the Empress later; she would surely give him permission.

This night, his dinner was with Baroness Bedelia du Maurier, in all of her loveliness. She arrived wearing the latest trend, he believed it was simple patterns and low extended waist-lines, and a beautiful mask made of bone. A pang in his heart reminded him of the mask Alana and he had given to Abigail, inspired by the halla goddess Will revered and her own status as a hunter. Bedelia’s mask seemed more inspired by the butterfly, if the flaring at the side of the face and intricately carved and colored designs were any indication. The set-up tonight was conspicuously more elaborate, if only to add another layer to their engagement in mental combat.

They usually spoke with each other bare-faced, so it was amusing to see her shock at his mask. When he was younger, his mask had been a cross between the faces of theater, but the obsidian one with skull-like features and extending antlers that clutched and surrounded his

head was certainly his as an established peer in the Game. If she had gotten out more in the last few years, she might have seen it. It allowed him to revel in his Nevarran heritage and throw it in the face of opponents while maintaining an elegant and foreboding appearance.

“Lady du Maurier,” he had greeted and the smallest lift of the corners of her mouth betrayed her amusement at the formality. They may not always get along, they may not even like each other much, but they still had known each other a very long time. It was always fun when they got to see each other in a much more civilized setting. Bedelia was also in a much better mood since she was not beholden to his company.

‘Better mood’ was relative, of course. She still didn’t want to see him. It would be rude of her to refuse an invitation to his table upon her re-entering society, however, and she didn’t want to be seen as impolite.

They ate quietly, a spiced plum sauce with foie gras that reminded him of Antiva. He had paired it with a white wine from Nevarra, to remind him of home. Small comforts in this place. Naturally, this was only the main course; small hors d’oeuvres popular in different regions of Orlais were on a spread before the meal and he planned on finishing it with an elaborate tart. Throughout, they exchanged meaningless pleasantries. Hannibal caught Bedelia up on the various issues at court and the latest scandal with the du Launcets while she engaged politely in what her spies had told her. It was only after a decent amount of time that Hannibal brought up the topic that he really wanted to speak about.

“High Seeker Chilton let slip that Will asked to see me in front of one of Nesiraya’s Friends.”

Bedelia watched and said nothing.

“I would like to see him. Despite all that has happened, I continue to be curious about him and the way that he thinks.”

The Baroness narrowed her eyes. “He’s still influencing you. This young man has accused you plain as day of the crimes that he allegedly committed and then wishes to speak with you plainly? He wants to manipulate you.”

“And if I agree to see him?”

She snorted lightly, not enough to make the obnoxious noise that usually came with the action. “It betrays your clear intent to manipulate him.”

He had always been able to speak with her about private matters. Now seemed as good a time to confess as any. “I miss him.” In the month between their brief and non-existent exchange in the Bastion d’Argent to his arrival in Val Royeaux, Hannibal had a lot of time to reflect on what this meant. He supposed that the high of his careful play kept the feeling from actually hitting them; it was more like the anticipation of missing Will. The initial refusal of his request into the White Spire had made it more apparent; he had wanted Will as a captive audience, but now the young man couldn’t even enjoy the show.

“Is it possible that you’re confusing your needs with that of your former protege’s?”

“Will was never just my protege.” That came out of his mouth. It was honest, but perhaps unnecessary considering the fact that Bedelia clearly knew that already. Out of the corner of his eye, Hannibal saw a servant scuttle out of the room. Good, that would get back to Celene.

Bedelia pointed out, “He is changing your behavior and you’re hoping you can change his.”

“I only wanted to help him.”

She tilted her head at him, what he could see of her face carefully shutting down. “The way that we think is flawed, but the flaws are systemic. Even when irrational, we are predictable. In this way, you are about your former protege.”

Hannibal’s silence made it clear that he was still questioning where she was going.

“You are obsessed with Will.”

He corrected, “I’m intrigued.”

“Obsessively,” was the retort. “He’s going to take advantage of that. He already has. He nearly cost you your reputation.”

“My reputation is intact.”

“For now.”

“He is my friend.”

Bedelia looked askance, her mouth visibly dropping. Behind the holes in her mask, Hannibal could see her eyes widen. “Why? She asked, audibly confused. The cadence that she usually adopted around him to mask her intent dropped completely. “Why is he your friend?”

That was something to consider. Why did he want to be Will’s friend? “Will cannot anticipate his thoughts or block them. He sees himself and his abilities as grotesque and twisted, but useful. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot repress who he is. There's honesty in that I admire.”

“I imagine there’s an honesty in that you can relate to,” she snarked.

He smiled. She wasn’t wrong after all. It was gratifying that it made her flinch.

Court was as vicious as he remembered. That was what Hannibal always loved about it. Everyone there had a similar affectation as him, if they didn’t always agree on a base level. Politeness and subtly ruled, overt rudeness was treated as boorish and laughable. Any snide remark was sly and allowed those that understood its meaning to titter over it while the mark was none the wiser. Val Royeaux was the beating heart of the Grand Game, and here Hannibal was among his people. He knew that the day that a man using the wrong fork at dinner was immediately stabbed with the right one by a nearby observer that ‘slipped’ from the shock.

Granted, Hannibal did not enjoy their petty squabbles. Perceived slights and pain just to get ahead was never in his repertoire. The Comte knew that he had all of the makings and abilities to rule this Court as well as the Dowager, the Empress, or the Council of Heralds, but was content as a relatively lower ranked noble. With that, he was able to slip through the cracks and steer things in a certain way without anyone suspecting him of anything. It didn't give him a lot of power, but it did provide plenty of amusement. It was a tremendous joy to watch the ants play amongst themselves while he had a much greater game in mind.

Speaking of the grander game, the very next day Hannibal journeyed to the Empress's palace to get access to his potential opposition. Jack's influence was dwindling among the Seekers of Truth thanks to the mishap with Will and, furthermore, the man was intent on protecting him from Will. He was going to have to find another way into the Spire. Celene was immensely fond of him and had a distinct lack of judgement towards what he got up to in his own time. He doubted she would be as accepting if she knew about all of his extracurricular activities, but the woman did know about a few of his proclivities and opinions about the Court; she was content to allow him his fun. The rumors that he and Will were lovers did slightly lower his reputation, but he was able to play it off and Hannibal also knew that Celene was inclined to believe the rumors. She had an elven lover of her own and, if he played it right, would be sympathetic to him for wanting to visit, regardless of the truth of the matter.

Speaking of Celene's elven lover, Hannibal caught a glimpse of Briala skulking in the shadows. The Empress's playmate as a child, handmaid and lover as an adult, was always a slippery one, wriggling through crowds and into the heart of the servants. She saw more than most, her eyes extended by the large network of servants she was building. Briala was no Red Jenny or one of her friends, but she did accomplish small things for those of lower rank when she had the time. At any other moment, she was the Right hand of the Empress, keeping watch over the flock.

When Hannibal approached the door to speak with Celene, Briala stopped him. "Your Lordship," she greeted, voice deceptively pitched. Unlike most servants, this one wore a mask as well, headcovering included. The only thing that gave her away were the long ears retreating on the head. "It has come to my attention that you had an elven protege you were sponsoring, would that be correct?"

"I did."

"And that he is currently in the care of our Templar Order?"

He nodded. "The young man is currently in the Spire."

What was she getting at?

"I am curious as to how he ended up there. All of my reports about the situation say different things, but everyone that looked beyond the arrests and eventual verdict seemed to doubt the legitimacy of the situation."

"It is very tenuous. I am sure that if Will is innocent, it will be proven." He stared down the challenge on her face and in her voice. It was a threat; Celene had talked to him on several

occasions on Briala's protectiveness towards her people. Her primary concern was usually with city elves, but Will wasn't part of a Clan anymore. This was, of course, despite her relatively privileged position as the bard for the Empress herself.

The elven spy hummed under her breath and glided away, no sound following her. He hadn't missed the suspicious look she shot him as she left. He would have to tread a bit more carefully if the Empress's spymaster was watching him. As much as it irked him, he would probably have to hold off on making any meals at the moment. Even if he were to target someone against the Empress, there is a chance that Briala might take the opportunity to cast doubts on him. Murdering a rival is one thing, but eating them is another. He had to admire her fierceness though; it would probably break the bond between the Empress and her spymaster eventually, but it was good to allow them what they had.. For now.

The way was clear. Now he could speak to her Radiance without interruption.

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Frederick had given him a stern warning earlier this morning that he had to be on his best behavior. Apparently, he was going to get a very important visitor. The High Seeker was not as subtle as he must have thought, because Will was very aware that it was going to be Comte Hannibal Lecter. His request had been roughly a day ago, plus or minus a couple of hours. Will wasn't sure if that meant it had been accomplished quickly or slowly. His time at the White Spire had been very short, so he lacked the experience to compare.

The dungeon hallway was muffled from his perspective, the door and grate in it keeping noise from echoing in the room properly. All he got was a small grate in the ceiling that allowed air and the noise from outside in. It was far too high for him to actually see out of it; the only light that he got came from there and it was blinding. At night, he had been left in the pitch black, shadows within shadows stepping through the space when his eyes were open and shut. The noise from outside, through the grate, was quiet, but loud in comparison to the exterior of his cell. The laughter of children and young mages enjoying the outside classes for the day was pleasant. The Spire was inland and surrounded by tall, reinforced walls so that no one got any bright ideas about escaping. The ones that Will could hear were the obedient sort; there was no need to keep them inside.

Through the haze the door created, Will could hear the clicking of shoes. It was the clack that came from the high heels of fashionable men's shoes favored by Orlesians, not the clink of armored boots. It seems the special guest arrived. Will wasn't sure whether he should get closer to the bars or stay huddled on the cot. Time ran out too quickly for him to come to any sort of decision, so the elf stayed put.

The sliding of the window covering echoed in his space and the slit of a Templar's helmet peeked through. It screeched shut, metal against metal. The locks and bars to the door boomed while Will dealt with the abrupt dizziness that always came when the Templars depleted his mana. In stepped the Comte.

Before, Will would have called Hannibal ostentatious at best, but this new look definitely took the cake. Comparatively, his many outfits in Halamshiral and Red Crossing were subdued. He still was pulling for the gothic Nevarran look, infusing Orlesian fashion with

morbidity. It was clear that this outfit was meant to invoke the dragon hunting that Nevarran adventurers were famous for, with the shoulders curving back for wings and horns, jewels carefully patterned to resemble scales. The mask he wore was even slightly altered to suit the change, looking less like the half-mask of an antlered man and instead a full mask styled like the skull of a dragon.

“Hello, Will,” his Lordship greeted, voice rumbling through the mask. The way it sounded struck Will; it seemed that the mask was not made of plaster, but instead actual bone. Whether or not it actually belonged to something draconic remained to be seen, but the threat was there.

“Comte Lecter,” Will managed to say without spitting. He may have requested the man’s presence, but that didn’t make him feel any less resentful by the sight of him. It was Hannibal’s fault he wasa in this terrible place after all.

“I was surprised by the invitation,” Hannibal began and the absurdity of the statement made Will laugh despite himself.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t offer you more hospitality,” he retorted through gritted teeth. He smiled politely with his lips, but he knew his eyes still held the angry and dangerous glint. His muscles coiled up and he had to suppress the urge to pounce or pace. “It seems strange to see you in front of me. I’ve been dwelling on our last conversation so much that it feels like I just saw you. No matter how hard I try, your voice looms over me and occupies my thoughts.” The laugh he gave now was bitter and tart on his tongue. “I can’t get you out of my head.”

“I’ve missed you as well,” Hannibal replied. It was either willful misunderstanding or the man was trying to rile him up. If it was the latter, it was working tremendously. “Friendship can sometimes involve a breach of individual separateness. You become so focused on the other individual it seems wrong to be apart from them.” Will heard the shifting of armor from the other side of the door and was promptly reminded that they were not alone. It seemed like Hannibal didn’t care.

“A blurring of self and friend?” Will asked as he got up from the cot. The human noble followed his movement. Despite the subtlety, Will managed to notice it. “Yes,” Hannibal breathed out.

“You’re not my friend.” More movement from the other side of the door. “Whatever friendship we may have had was lost the moment I stepped into a cell.”

“I imagine it is easier to believe I am responsible for those murders than it is to accept that you are.”

“Oh,” he breezed. “Most definitely.” Will stepped cautiously towards the bars and smothered a smirk when he saw Hannibal do the same. The man was drawn to him, danger or not. Will couldn’t really do anything like this, lacking magic and the proper leverage to do any damage. The most Will would get was the satisfaction of knowing he caused a bruise, before the templars would rush in and kick him down (literally).

“You need to find your proper inner voice, the one amongst the demons that guides you on the right path. It will allow you to take control of your behavior and bring understanding to the situation you find yourself in. You would be able to place the responsibility on the proper perpetrator and take what culpability you are due. Find the true words and you will achieve clarity.” Sloppy, encouraging him to listen to the voices of whatever was in his head in front of the guards. Still, they seemed to etiehr not care or they were too dumb to understand a person directly telling him to listen to demons or whatever. It had to be the latter.

“I have clarity. I don’t need it from them.”

“About what I wonder?”

“About you.”

The man went still and changed direction, not thrown off guard but clearly not expecting Will to be so direct. Well, he was allowed to. No one was going to stop him here. The Templars didn’t give a fuck about what was going on in the cell. “Our conversations were only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.”

Will stepped right up to the bars and Hannibal followed closely behind. He could feel the other man’s eyes on him, the breath flowing through the mouth of the mask on his cheek. There was only a simple barrier between them and he smiled, anger and confidence mixing inside as he was beginning to see Hannibal’s weakness. “What you did to me, what you encouraged in me, is in my head and I am going to find it.” Hannibal was still, leaning forward in anticipation. “I’m going to remember, your Lordship, and when I do, there will be a reckoning.” He pulled away, leaving Hannibal at the bars.

The noble pulled back and tried to compose himself. It was fairly easy as nary a hair was out of place. “I have tremendous faith in you, Will. I always have.” Then he exited, leaving Will alone with his thoughts.

Something that felt like triumph permeated his being, but it was too soon to celebrate.

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It had taken them forever to find a good place for the Mabari to run, but damned if Alana and Beverly hadn’t tried. The small park in Val Royeaux was clearly meant for nobles to go on picnics or walk about the trellises and stare at roses. The golden lion statues for the Valmont family were slightly obnoxious in and of itself, so both women decided against staying in the area. Instead, they found the brood invited to the Crawford apartments close to the palace. Apparently, they had a sizable courtyard where the hounds would have plenty of room to rumble. Bella also said that she liked having something to care for, even if all she could do was sit outside and watch the dogs as they played.

Both women talked to Madame Crawford and asked about her health, but she only waved them off. The Empress had heard of her return and gave her small tasks to do and advisement booklets to write and dispense (and a student to teach), so she wasn’t on her own. Alana heard Jack mention on more than one occasion that he worried the Empress was overworking her in her failing health, but Bella had confessed that staying busy helped her mind.

In this rare moment of stolen peace, Beverly chased several of the Mabari around the spacious glorified play area for the mutts while Alana threw treats for them high in the air and watched several hounds dive for them. She had been trying to aim for increasingly complex places to test the fabled Mabari intelligence and they hadn't disappointed so far.

The only one left out of the pack was Winston, who was sitting by the working Madame Crawford like a vigilant bodyguard. His body was faced away from the ambassador and he showed no sign of acknowledging her presence, but held himself rigid anyway. No matter how close they threw the treats or walked past the pair, Winston did not move. He stayed perfectly still, even when a small bone specially picked out for him landed on his head. "Come on," Alana tried to coax, but Winston just stared.

"He's alright where he is," Bella called out and gave Winston a pat on the head; he leaned into the touch slightly and his stub of a tail gave a small wiggle, but he did not give any other reaction. Beverly looked at her from across the way and just shook her head. This wasn't a fight worth having, especially not with a grieving dog.

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The first person to visit Will that wasn't the esteemed Comte Hannibal Lecter or High Seeker Chilton didn't end up being Jack or Beverly like expected, but instead was Alana. His lack of consideration of the former Sister, someone who was once a close friend, did make him feel slightly guilty. Especially now that she was the only person who thought he was worth a visit. When they allowed her into the cell, he almost didn't recognize her; the piece-meal plate armor suited her far better than a Chantry Sister's frock ever did. Her hair was pulled up instead of free flowing or hiding under a headpiece; its style, braided and pulled into a bun, only highlighted the other brunette's face. What took most of his attention, however, was an eye wreathed in flame, the symbol of the Seekers of Truth, that was emblazoned on the breast plate. It appeared that Alana was officially in the order. Beverly had told him that she was training 'the Lady Bloom', but it was one thing to hear and another to see.

Didn't that sting?

Once the iron door barred her way back, making Alana feel as if they had privacy even though they most definitely did not, she began to speak. "I'm sorry that no one else has visited yet. They're all still uncomfortable and are trying to deal with what happened."

I'm still trying to deal with what happened, he didn't say. That doesn't mean he wasn't tempted. Instead, Will said, "I understand. Is everyone in good health?"

His conversation partner shrugged. "More or less. Madame Ambassador Crawford's condition is worsening, but she seems to be invigorated by the dogs."

"The dogs?"

Alana had the decency to look sheepish. "After they took you, Beverly, Jack, and I fought to keep the Mabari. At the moment, Beverly and I are still in the barracks, which doesn't leave a lot of room for frolicking hounds. Jack and Bella apparently have a home in Val Royeaux with access to a decent outdoor area nearby. They're the ones who've really taken them in."

Jack took his dogs? Will appreciated the gesture immensely, even if his relationship with Jack had been torn to shreds. Whose fault was that anyway? Certainly it was not his, maybe not even Jack's.

Another thing to lay at Hannibal's feet.

"Winston seems to have the most trouble adjusting," Alana continued, oblivious to his trailing thoughts. "He's been sticking around Bella as if he fancies himself a guard dog and the only time he's really active is when she is." She leaned forward conspiratorially, but the effect was ruined because she didn't want to go right up to the bars. He couldn't blame her. "I think he misses you."

"Misses me?"

"And why wouldn't he? Mabari bond for life. I think the only reason he's not out looking for you is because he knows us and thinks we'll bring you to him."

"I don't think he'll get to see me again." Even if he was to be declared innocent of purposefully killing anyone, the Seekers and Templars would never let him go. They had a dangerous and unpredictable mage in their grasp and they would do whatever they did for the greater good of Thedas. He just hoped that if the end was to come that they killed him; better that than to be made Tranquil.

"One day he might. I hope so anyway. If we can convince the people in charge of your case that you're innocent, in a couple of years and once you pass the Harrowing they might allow us to bring them in."

He snorted. Not to say that he didn't admire her faith, but the odds were looking very thin. "That's a big 'if', Alana."

This time she did lean all the way up to the bars and extended a hand out to him. Will glanced up at the viewer, but nobody was looking. Gingerly, he reached back and took the hand. "I don't want you to end up in the hands of Chilton," Alana declared. "I got wind from Jack that he's here trying to convince the Lord Seeker to allow him to take you back to the Bastion. We saw what he did to Abel Gideon; guilty or not, no one deserves that. I won't allow the same kind of abuse to happen to you!"

That wasn't quite what he was expecting. The focus on her face was something to be admired. While Will knew that Frederick was here (was very aware), he was under the impression that it was because Will had been working with the Seekers, and Chilton was the High Seeker of the region. So, he was trying to get the Lord Seeker to allow him to keep the Dreamer elf? There was another potential fate on the board. Will wasn't sure whether that was better or worse than any of the rest of them. "So what's your solution?" Will asked. "What exactly are you going to do to keep me from experiencing that?"

"Prove that it wasn't remotely you. You had a demon influencing you, we all know it. You are innocent! Then, we just have to prove that you're free from it."

She didn't understand. To her, this was about keeping him from Frederick, from abuse. It didn't matter though, he was already dealing with that and would continue to no matter what route he went. His only hope was to get out of here; Alana was too focused on fixing corruption to see it. "Then what?" Will challenged. "I end up being seen as too dangerous and am made Tranquil? I pass my Harrowing and end up stuck here for the rest of my life?" He spat on the word 'Harrowing'. "I don't know what you're expecting Alana, but it's too late for me."

She went silent. "I'm sorry Will. I just wanted to help." Then, she left, nary a sound after. Will was, once again, alone, and the only person who wanted to visit him was gone.

V^-V-^V

Another night, another dinner. This was a much quieter affair, not because Hannibal wished to make it seem more intimate, but simply because he did not feel like putting in the effort. This entire meal was merely for appearances' sake. The High Seeker did allow him into the White Spire without alerting the Lord Seeker (although it did require the Empress's aid) and, at the end of his and Will's conversation, Chilton promised that he would be allowed future visits with interruption or obstruction.

In Orlais, if someone did you a favor, you owed them one in return. After their last dining experience together, anytime they were in the same room Chilton exclaimed his excitement for the elusive next meal. As this was of major significance to Hannibal, he agreed to host the man for one meal. Currently, the High Seeker's diet was slightly limited in portion sizes and the amount of meat allowed, which only put off the Comte even more.

The man in question had elected not to wear his armor for the evening, for which Hannibal was grateful. The obnoxious noise of plate armor rarely did anything for the appetite. Besides, with the way that Chilton grimaced simply for moving, regardless of whether he was outfitted for battle, there was no way they would have made it through the meal without the man having to excuse himself or get a healer. Hannibal was already frustrated by having to play nice.

"I remain impressed with your recovery," Hannibal said after discussing the contents of the plate. Something traditionally Orlesian to provide some form of comfort for the man.

Chilton bowed his head, looking delighted at the compliment. Naturally, the man only lived through the sheer tenacity of the healers on sight and those that were with him through the entire recovery, yet the man took the comment as if it was for him. They ate for a moment, and just before Hannibal was going to prompt the man to speak, Chilton took the bait and chattered away all on his own. "Your former protege finally got a visitor."

"Besides myself?" Hannibal felt the need to clarify.

"Besides yourself. Lady Alana, well, Novice Bloom came a-calling. She wanted to 'see how he was doing'," Chilton explained, mocking Alana as he went. Of course, the Comte had great respect for the Lady Bloom and was going to keep in mind his disregard for later. The High Seeker leaned forward on the table, getting his elbows on the expense cloth. "It's so strange. He is in my care, but he refuses to speak to me. Every other person and he'll just

chitter away, but with me it's only stony silence and glares." He took a hearty bite of food and spoke around the mouthful, "He doesn't realize it, but I'm going to be the one that will keep him alive. You'd think that'd count for something."

"Will was always going to be a challenge," Hannibal advised. "He doesn't appreciate people trying to tell him how he thinks and what he feels."

"Yet he consorted with spirits that do exactly that," his guest muttered. Then, Chilton cleared his throat and continued, "He's a Dreamer, a prize mage in any Circle. They have powers we haven't even begun to understand; we haven't had the opportunity. Every contemporary Dreamer I've ever heard of either died young or was possessed by demons. That and he appears to be a former abomination twice over, if what I understand about Augur training is true. Twice, he was possessed by a demon and twice he came back. If there is a place where I can find an alternative to Tranquility, it would be with him."

"You may be placing too much faith in this as a method of study," steered the Comte. Under any other circumstance, he would have tried to encourage it. On one hand, it would be the perfect experiment to observe and, on the other, it actually seemed to be helpful to other people. As a rule, Hannibal tried to keep away from the underlying current of politics (beyond his own cursory and necessary involvement as a noble), but Tranquility has always been something he despised. To have all that you are taken away from you was a deep violation. People should try and be their truest selves or be punished for it, not have the choice to act taken away entirely, if only because the world was no fun otherwise.

"It doesn't matter," Chilton waved his hand dismissively. "I don't think we're any closer to understanding him now than when we got him. If I don't make some sort of breakthrough soon, the Lord Seeker may reject my proposal outright. She could still agree, of course, but I don't have a guarantee."

A thrum of pleasure burst in his chest. Hannibal seemed to be the only person ever to get a grasp on Will, as slim and tentative as that hold was. "What will happen if Lord Seeker Prurnell doesn't agree with you?"

Frederick shrugged, shoving another bite in. "This is delicious," he said around the mouthful. "I suppose he'll be killed or made Tranquil. It depends on how she and the Knight Vigilant declare his culpability and awareness during the murders. If he's fully guilty, Will will have execution. If he's not, then he'll probably be made Tranquil to prevent something like this from happening again."

"Any time frame?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I'll keep you posted." There was that at least. He might be allowed a time limit, if he keeps in contact with Frederick. It was slightly unpleasant, but news of Will was well worth the inconvenience.

"How was her visit?"

"According to his guards, she went on and on about how she would save him from the corruption of the Seekers of Truth by fighting it from the inside. A novice? Trying to fight

something that does not exist? I think not. Eventually, she upset him and he made her leave." The thrill came again, undefinable in its cause and origin. Naturally, it made sense for WIll to reject Alana and that was something to be celebrated; an isolated Will was a vulnerable one. "It was a change of pace, honestly. The first day or so, he was set on convincing the guards that he didn't do anything wrong. In the few brief times we've conversed, he clammed up." Chilton continued to shovel at the food in a most undignified way. He was lucky to not put Hannibal off of his own.

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"I could have sworn that you told me that you hated that man," Abigail said as soon as Chilton was gone. He had said something to that effect on one of their many conversations prior to her going into hiding. The dinners he had been hosting the last few nights had been extremely difficult for her; it was like being in Halamshiral for the first time all over again, only this time there was no Alana to speak with. Instead, she just watched from the secret passages usually reserved for the servants in the estate, observing every meal and wondering what would happen if she just stepped out into the light.

Odds are she would go to jail. Hannibal did say that she had never been declared innocent and they would say she was a fraud or find another conviction to put her into prison or worse. She still wasn't quite happy with what had to be done to get here, but Abigail was pleased that their machinations led to her living.

"Hate is a very strong word for what I feel about High Seeker Chilton," Hannibal replied, cleaning up after their meal disdainfully. Abigail moved to help, politely cleaning up after the other man's mess. "That would imply that I feel he is worth hating. The man barely functions as a player in the Game. I feel only irritation as one would at a fly buzzing around their head."

She smiled. "He does like to buzz." The way that man yammered, one would think there was a competition for it. Maybe that's what bureaucrats actually did; their meetings were about seeing who could go the longest without stopping and they continually tried to one up each other for a secret prize. She wondered what kind of prize it would have to be to keep them from accomplishing anything… probably land or a very fine port. It would have to be Antivan as Orlesian vintages were going out of fashion again. "Why exactly was he here, though, if he irritates you so much?"

"He is granting me access to Will. I got to see him today and it felt only right that I invite the man who promised to allow me future visits without needing the Empress to run interference."

On one thought crossed her mind: "You got to see Will! How is he?" It had been plaguing her since the confirmation that Will had been recaptured and headed for the White Spire. If he became Tranquil or died because of her, she didn't know how she would bear it.

"He is doing fine, if a bit grumpy about his situation," Hannibal replied, amusement clear on his face. He moved to one side of the kitchen where the still aerating wine sat. He poured one glass, then two, and offered the second to her. She took a couple of graceful sips, pleased when she realized the alcohol content was fairly low. Abigail didn't feel comfortable getting

even slightly tipsy around her guardian. She always felt like she was being lied to and needed to keep on top of her game.

He had lied to her before, after all.

V^-V-^V

Hannibal could do more than just dinner. The Lord knew that to succeed at the Game, every move needed to be decisive and swift. He had already invited the Baroness to a delicious breakfast in anticipation of what would soon be Jack Crawford's line of questioning. The man was focused, not dense. Should he look around and see the forest for the trees, Hannibal's little visit to Will yesterday would not go unnoticed; the Seekers were already 'investigating' him. He needed to plant seeds now, less the man caught up sooner than expected.

Bedelia ate across from him gracefully, daintally attacking the food on her plate with the utensils. Each stroke of her knife across the rare meat caused it to ooze the blood on the plate, which made her face twitch. She was far too polite to refuse and the meal tasted delicious. Eating with the woman who used to so aggressively refuse his meals was only half the enjoyment. The other half came from her reaction when he got to the real meat of the matter:

"Jack Crawford will likely question you about me soon. I give you full permission to say whatever you feel is necessary." He barely contained a grin when he saw her mouth twitch, likely nearly spitting out her food if it got that much of a reaction. "I feel that it would be in my best interest and yours if we are totally up front with the Seekers of Truth; they have their name for a reason after all."

Her stare was approximately incredulous. "What exactly is the nature of the situation that you find yourself in if you feel that him coming to speak with me is in any way a possibility?"

"I went to speak with Will Graham yesterday." One of the forks clattered against the plate. Gingerly, Bedelia reached out a shaking hand to retrieve it. She took several more bites, chewing excruciatingly slow, probably considering the proper words to say next.

She swallowed. "You went to speak with him, did you?"

He nodded. "I did. It was a short, yet enlightening conversation."

Bedelia gave him an inquisitive look, but after a couple minutes of silence, she yielded. "You're not going to tell me."

"Why should I? You understand the crux of the issue. Will is accusing me of murder and I chose to go visit him in a private setting. It doesn't exactly make me less suspicious."

"And yet opening your doors wide will?" Bedelia's tone seemed to indicate that it should be anything but. Did she have such little faith in him that a cursory line of questioning would arouse that much doubt? Unless one knew where the solitary secret door was in his estate, they had no clue where anything damning would be. Then, they'd have to actually get close enough to use it and then not be stopped by his many traps and safeguards. "Jack Crawford

and I share an obsession. This brings us closer as surely as it drives us apart. I'm only being as open and honest as I know how. I am a reasonable person."

She gritted her teeth, audible as her tongue clicked against them. "And as a reasonable person, I'm wondering why you would allow the Seekers of Truth their scrutiny."

It was curious how simple words could weave around a person. "You are more suspicious of me than even Jack Crawford."

"Jack Crawford didn't watch you learn to navigate this environment and doesn't see how you work even now. He doesn't know what you're capable of."

A small corner of his mouth twitched for a terrible and wonderful moment. "Neither do you."

Bedelia froze, her entire body ceasing any extraneous movement one part at a time. "You maintain an air of transparency while putting me in a position to lie for you," she breathed out, anger or fear filling her voice. "Again."

"Not just for me," he pointed out, which only made her rigidity more pronounced. It was such a magnificent threat, said so casually that it could be nothing. Bedelia was on the ropes now; if the Seekers of Truth came knocking, her only way out of the situation would be to lie for him. Not so terrible unless his actions came to light, which would instantly shed doubt on hers. If she ever came forward, the Baroness would have to explain why she neglected to speak prior. "How long will this continue?"

"I'm curious about that myself."

Hannibal had another appointment that day as well, and was glad to do it. Thanks to Will's accusations about his person, the Seekers were actually investigating him, not just Jack Crawford. In fact, Jack had little to do with the actual search of his home; apparently, he was considered too close to Hannibal to do it properly. To be sure it wasn't being done with any seriousness, but they were interested enough in being thorough. They were Seekers of Truth after all, thorough was in their nature. His designs within the Seekers were not enough to stop this, which was why he was entertaining them in his home as they tore through his personal effects. The only saving grace was that he had Beverly Katz standing by his side to make sure he didn't go anywhere and tamper with potential evidence.

His Lordship was not worried about them finding Abigail; the secret door was well hidden and the person most likely to find it was standing by his side. Everyone else was meaningless in this encounter. Of course, her own presence was rather redundant at this moment; she wasn't looking, let alone speaking with him. In fact, Seeker Katz was steadily watching the lesser Seekers and a couple of guards that went in and out of his space. He needed to prod, slightly. It was vital that he ascertain her point of view on Will. It would be a window to the rest of them.

"I am amazed at how people perceive us because of what we leave behind in the world."

The Seeker startled. Several younger ones stopped briefly to check on her before they continued their jobs. "I'm sorry?"

Not dissuaded, Hannibal continued, “Well, here I am with Seekers of Truth going through my belongings. I wonder what kind of truth they are finding among my clothes and sundry.” He gestured to a young man in light armor that was currently grimacing at his wardrobe, apparently believing himself to be out of visual range.

Seeker Katz raised a slim eyebrow, “If you’re worried about people forcing themselves to see evidence amongst your possessions, don’t. The only person that actually expects to find anything is Will.”

Keeping a pleasant expression on his face, Hannibal responded, “He’ll have to be disappointed then. That is the beauty of the Seekers of Truth, Mademoiselle Katz. You all bring certainty and order to the chaos of this existence and justice to the corrupt.” Surprisingly, she did not puff up or seem honored by his words. Either she had a pessimistic opinion about her order and was simply too polite to show it or she was immune to flattery. Both were wonderful traits for a Seeker, but less than ideal for his machinations.

“We find the core of the matter whenever we can, your Lordship,” she said, voice stiff and unamused. “I found enough evidence to place Will where he is now, no need to infer, intuit, or trust.”

“The strong foundation of reality on which our manufactured perceptions are based.”

Beverly replied darkly, “Will has done some manufacturing.” So she was aware of Will’s accusations of Hannibal in the deed that led to this farce. She seemed angry, but it was difficult to say whom the anger was directed at.

“Will is simply doing his best to understand where he is and why.”

Beverly rounded on him, eyes flashing. “You were supposed to protect him!” This time, a couple of novices attempted to join them and interfere, but Hannibal waved them off. She was clearly upset about her friend’s situation and trying to make sense of why Will would do something like this. Part of her brain could see the figures not adding up, but her duty prevented her from simply letting the matter go (in either direction).

“From himself?” Hannibal asked, trying to get her to put the situation in perspective. Granted, the perspective he was trying to give her was technically false, but upping the idea of his helplessness in the situation might help her come to terms with her own problems with it.

Beverly deflated, all of the energy just sapped from her body. “I’m not mad at you anymore than I am at myself. We all missed it. I just wish that I had noticed sooner or at least put my food down during the times I know I could have, at least in retrospect.”

Hannibal gently patted her shoulder before moving away to give her space. “There are a lot of things that we could have done during this series of events, but that doesn’t change what is happening now and what we can control here.”

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They had been called down to the river in the middle of the day. The river in question was a small one that ran under the grand bridge into Val Royeaux, which then led down to the Waking Sea. Alana had never actually looked at it too closely, but now she didn't have much of a choice. A crowd of guards were swarming around the scene, some looking angrily at the presence of the Seekers coming through, but they had been requested by the Guard-Captain to take a look at that mess. Someone must've suspected that blood magic of some sort was afoot.

To say that Alana was nervous was a vast understatement. This was her first actual scene with the gang; they had all declared the whole mess with Will didn't count. It was so far out of the ordinary for any of them that they didn't want it to. She looked behind her and Beverly and Jimmy each gave her an encouraging smile and a thumbs-up. To her side, Brian nudged her with his elbow and did a little dance he had earlier dubbed his 'congratulations' shimmy. Jack was leading the way, so she didn't get to seek any reassurance from him. The former Lady Bloom knew that taking a novice to a scene was highly irregular, but Jack had declared her his apprentice and was already considered a bit of a maverick amongst the Order (according to basically every other novice she talked to). Some of them praised his outside of the box thinking while others scoffed at his rejection of tradition and his repeated testing of the pliancy of the boundaries imposed on Seekers.

A very memorable asshole spat at Beverly and Jimmy when he thought they weren't looking and called Jack a 'knife-ear' and 'dirt-born' lover. Brian kneed him in the balls, but Jack went over to the young man and interrogated him on his information and reprimanded him for his behavior. Apparently, Beverly and Jimmy's statuses as half-bloods were meant to be secrets.

The river flowed in front of them before Alana's eyes and what greeted her was decidedly unpleasant. Hung out on fishing nets were the nude and partially skinned bodies of six women. All of them were of varying sizes, but appeared to be about the same age and skin tone (with some slight differences). That was all they could really tell about them, as their hair was so lanky and wet that it was hard to tell what color it was… what hair was there at least. It appeared that some of it had been shorn off or pulled out. Brian stared for a moment before approaching one body and gently prying its mouth open; he appeared shocked for a moment before immediately moving to the next body.

Alana peered closer and saw that the eyes of each of the women had been gouged out. Their bodies smelled almost briny up close, something strong and chemically that stung the nose, and it was joined by the putrid smell of ooze. She could now also see that the bodies were bloated. It was very possible that the varying sizes had less to do with the actual size of the women and more with how long they had been there.

Their alchemist turned back to the group. "They're missing teeth. It varies between each of them, but some of them are missing quite a few and others none at all." Jack swore.

Beverly called out to the rest of the group. "I found something!" They ran over.

In her hands was a large bundle, which she was untangling from the net. It took a moment for Alana to recognize what it was, but, once she did, she almost threw up. Beverly was holding a large bundle of skins, each pulled from whatever body they came from and cut into squares.

They were exceedingly clean and well-treated. They also were of varying skin tones that were roughly around the same shade, some of which did not match the women hung in the fish net.

“That’s disgusting,” Jimmy complained.

“What are these?” Jack asked, askance.

“I think it’s obvious that this is skin,” Beverly answered and Jack just stared at her, less amused.

“It looks like he’s doing the same thing over and over,” Alana tested out. The group turned to her, but they didn’t look irritated or dismissive. They actually seemed attentive, like they were going to give whatever she had to say a try if nothing else. “Maybe these were practice runs? It looks like the bloating can give us a timeline and from that it looks like the shorter time they were there, the more stuff that was done with them.”

“That’s true!” Brian replied. “There does seem to be a progression of how extreme the modifications are.”

“So whatever he’s doing, he’s still trying to figure it out.”

Alana swallowed and tried not to think of all these women, thrown out like garbage. “They’re not what he wanted.”

It took them forever to get the bodies back to the barracks. Alana was sure that the smell of sea water and infection would stick to their nostrils forever, but eventually they were allowed fresh air. The rest of the group didn’t seem to be very bothered, so she held out as long as she could. Jimmy ended up offering a small pail for her to vomit in, which helped her constitution. No one seemed to judge her for it, and she was grateful. The ex-Sister believed she was starting to see the seams of the group and the stitching that allowed them to work together for so long; she longed to be sewn in with them.

“Hard to get a good match for them, but I managed to figure out a rough timeline based on the bloating of the bodies,” Jimmy said, nodding to Alana for the suggestion placed earlier. “After some digging, I managed to find some missing people that fit in with the timeline. After some interviews, I managed to find a small pattern.”

Beverely pulled up a few sheets of parchment, which had been drawn on with ink. The faces of many women, all roughly around twenty to thirty years of age, stared back up at them. “There are about fifteen women missing, all wives of merchants too rich to be peasants and too poor to properly play the game. They were known for their generosity, which prevented them from moving farther than local politics.”

“Cause of death?” Jack asked, in no mood for quippy remarks or games.

Brian butted in, pushing Jimmy behind him slightly. “It looks like strangulation. I noticed that some of the bloating and general discoloration managed to disguise bruising around the neck. It could be genuine air deprivation or the trachea shattering, but that was the cause.”

“Very hands on. Did the skinning occur before or after?”

“Hard to say. I’d probably say some of it occurred before, but the majority was afterwards. I’d probably go against sadism as a motive and be more inclined to say that during those few times, there was simply something that spurred him to move faster than normal.”

“Why take the teeth?” Alana asked. “Or the hair?”

Brian shrugged. Beverly muttered something about strange behavior and thinking differently under her breath, which pinged something in Alana’s brain. Was she finally going to visit Will? Alana knew that the young man missed her and it might be good for her to get some closure on the matter. If that was the case, Alana wouldn’t interfere. Better for them to work that out on their own.

“I think the more important question is why he is going after these specific women,” Jack redirected the group. If this was the target group, they needed to find the culprit fast, or the city might have to be put on lockdown. There were a lot of merchants’ wives in the city and one could only look so far for so long without losing at least one. Alana watched as Beverly seemed too distracted to comment and hoped for the best.

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Another day in his little cage and, this time, Will heard armor boots clanked down the hall. Somehow, he hoped that it would be Alana again so he could apologize or maybe one of the other members of the squad. Venhedis lasa, at this point he would take Jack, much as he didn’t know if he could actually face the man yet. He was trapped in this tiny space day in and day out with nothing to do except for listen to the mages outside and the occasional gossip that the guards gave him.

The person that came in was someone he was only vaguely familiar with, but certainly came with an air that he knew very well. Blonde head held high, expression pinched into something severe, and eyes glaring, the woman walked in with an air of authority and a certain amount of pomp. Clearly she was someone important and was used to people recognizing it. Before she could even introduce herself, Will knew who it was. He may have been drugged to his gills the last time that they spoke, but the insignia and attitude gave it away.

“I am Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell,” was the approximate greeting he received.

“Lord Seeker,” Will bowed his head. You don’t get that kind of title without earning the position, whether it with sheer faith and conviction or cutting down more troublemakers than your opponents. There was a certain amount of zealotry in her expression that made him think it laid somewhere in-between. “May I ask what prompted this visit?”

Her eyes flashed dangerously, seemingly affronted by perceived flippancy. “I am here to assess your state of mind during our investigation and evaluate your potential for any path that we choose to take.”

“Potential for any path?” Will repeated dubiously. The phrasing left a pit on his tongue, rolling around as he tried to find the words to respond. He only could use hers in that moment, too caught up in the various meanings each individual syllable could hold. This was his future; she was determining it. “What’s your position on it? You must have some preconceived opinion.”

She folded her arms, general body language leaving her towering over him. The fact that he was sitting down on the floor (to meditate) probably didn’t help, but now he couldn’t get up. It was a matter of principle. Getting up would mean that he wasn’t comfortable and felt the need to grab for more power in the situation. “My opinion is evolving. High Seeker Chilton has made several compelling arguments for why you should be brought back to the Bastion. The Knight Vigilant has made a case for your execution and several Grand Clerics have spoken for either Tranquility or rehabilitation. All of these are pending the outcome of your investigation.”

These were all possibilities that he was anticipating, but that didn’t make it any less final coming out of her mouth. These were what he had to look forward to and these were what he would have to plan for, short term. The unfortunate part was that out of all of them, rehabilitation was the best option. It was also the least likely. His status as a Dreamer would have to be completely ignored and he would have to be declared completely innocent of all crimes. “What I’m curious about is whether or not you’ll cooperate, given any outcome.” If it was possible, the blood rained from Will’s face.

“I’m sorry?”

She picked at her nails, carefully not looking at him, while smirking. “I have a few Seekers on standby, that have been trying to even the playing field for mages and Templars. For so long, if a mage went out of line they were killed or put through the Rite of Tranquility. High Seeker Chilton and I have been looking for a way to mitigate this.” Second best would be going with Chilton. He could survive Frederick’s games and wouldn’t lose his mind at the beginning. All it would require would be some more willpower (a pun he appreciated in a dark bitter kind of way) and less time being drained every minute. In short, he would have to prove himself a valuable research subject. Herein lies the problem: there was always a chance that he couldn’t hold out forever and he would still be enduring the torture.

And here the Lord Seeker was, pushing him to ‘cooperate’... whatever that meant. “And how exactly do you imagine me cooperating?”

“Why don’t we discuss it? Over the course of the investigation, you simply need to follow the Seekers’ line. Allow us to determine the result without too much protest, say what we need you to when the time comes, and I’ll see to it that you are granted certain privileges under Chilton’s care.”

“I-” The words wouldn’t come out of his mouth. He couldn’t incriminate himself. Even if they were to find Hannibal guilty, anything he said now would be a strike against him. “I don’t know.”

The Lord Seeker frowned. “I can see that you need to think about it. Please let me know when you’re ready to discuss saving your life.” Prurnell turned on her heel and left, only

waiting for the time it took for them to get the door open.

Will was left with the distinct feeling that this woman might ensure that he was declared guilty. Kade Prurnell seemed so righteous upon their meeting, but it turned out that she had her own agenda going. The mage was left unsure if it was relieving or not, to know that she had human emotions and motivations after all. While it gave him something to latch onto, it also meant any care he would receive was suspect. He would have to proceed with caution.

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Of all of the things to happen the next day, Bella telling him that Winston had gone missing and Beverly and Alana were searching the Val Royeaux market was not something he was expecting. So much was going on, between the whole fucking affair with Will and the murderer that they had on the loose, chasing a hound around the capital of Orlais was the smallest thing on his priority list. Nonetheless, he still joined the hunt looking for the Maker-damned dog.

The Mabari hounds had become such a part of their lives this last month, between the fight to keep them instead of allowing them to become abused pets to nobles looking for a thrill and the entire journey here, to this city. They were a part of the family, and Winston especially had been a great comfort to his wife. Bella was doing better; Empress Celene Valmont I had been giving her plenty of busy work and compensating her for her time, which helped her immensely. She never thrived when she was idle, but this gave her a chance to feel useful and busy. Seeing the healer had pulled her down and made her feel like she had no dignity left, but it was his job as her husband to show her everyday that she would forever remain the most dignified and gracious woman he had ever known.

In a strange way, ensuring that Winston came back to sit loyally at Bella's side was a piece of that. It only took him an hour to Winston, but getting him back to their apartments was the real challenge.

Jack was gently tugging on Winston's lead when he spotted Alana. Another noble passing them by unabashedly stared at the pair, which caused Winston to growl unhappily. Of course, it wasn't long before Winston noticed the novice as well and he proceeded to bound over to the young woman, taking Jack with him. Mabari weren't considered war hounds for no reason. The large man had to dig in his heels on his boots to prevent him from going too far.

"Winston! Winston! Sit," he commanded and the Mabari sat. The Mabari stared at him; this was their first real interaction alone since the whole incident with Will. The hound's eyes were accusing, leaving Jack sighing. Anything he might have said stopped when Alana stepped up to him.

"Thank the Maker you found him! We've been searching all morning," Alana rushed out. She turned to Winston, "Bad." The Mabari sunk down, ears low and sad. Her face softened and she gave him a few pats. None of them could stay angry at the hounds for long. Every time they did, the Mabari hounds just proceeded to look sad and they were overcome with a sense of guilt. They were stark reminders of Will and the person he was (or at least the person they thought he was). Scolding them felt like disrespecting the memory of a dead man.

“You need to keep a better watch on this dog.”

“Did you say that to your wife?” He hadn’t. He wasn’t going to.

Jack shook his head and looked at how close the dog was to the Grand Cathedral. It was only a short way to the White Spire from here. “He’s looking for Will, isn’t he?”

“Aren’t we all?” Alana asked. “I visited him a couple of days ago.” That was... concerning. Nobody had told him. “I didn’t want to worry anybody. It was something that I needed to do for myself. It wasn’t a very productive conversation. He was angry and bitter. I think we may have misunderstood each other.”

“I haven’t visited him yet. I don’t think I’d have anything productive to say either.”

Alana looked quizzically at him. He sighed, knowing what she was going to ask, but giving her the room to ask it. It wasn’t her fault that he could be a contrary and obtuse bastard if he wanted. She was his apprentice and he needed to be honest with her. “What do you mean?”

Now it was his turn. “I feel like I don’t know Will anymore. Every opinion I had of him must have been a lie. I think most of the conversation would be spent with me just questioning every other word that came out of his mouth. He’s already pointed fingers in every direction but his own, particularly Hanibal’s. He seemed ready to kill the man for it. It’s hard to listen to that, given the evidence.”

“I don’t think Will is guilty,” Alana declared, conviction pouring out of her. “We all saw it. He was vulnerable to spirits and demons. It would take very little effort for one to take a hold of him. The only reason that he seems to be so focused on Hannibal is that he doesn’t want to admit his vulnerability. It’s probably really frightening for him right now.”

Jack smiled, pleased at his apprentice. She was definitely the kind of Seeker that they needed. “I envy your certainty about him.” They had determined that Will wasn’t an abomination, at least not in the traditional sense. There would have been stronger signs, even Wynne had admitted this. If it was demonic influence, that still left Will slightly culpable. Either this was something they had never encountered before, Will was more guilty than he was claiming, or both.

“You used to be certain.”

Jack began walking back to the apartment without comment. It wasn’t far, which helped, but he knew better than to have this conversation out in the open where anyone could hear. Alana seemed to understand after a moment and followed without hesitation. Winston growled people that got too close to them which scared anyone that might interrupt off.

Once they were at his home, he turned to Alana. “Convince me. Convince me that he didn’t know what he was doing, that there was no way he could be responsible. I want to be convinced.”

“He is afraid of what he’s going to find and where that leaves him.”

Jack shook his head. “What he’s going to find… Somebody needs to find the truth. That’s our job. Where that leaves Will is our concern as his former friends, but is not when it comes to our duties.”

“We are who we are in the now, and we are the sum of our memories.”

“We are the sum of our responsibilities. Obligations don’t just go away because they are inconvenient.”

“Don’t we have one to Will?” Alana asked, then she walked away.

Upon reflection, Jack supposed that he did, even after all of this time.

Alana was right. Jack had an obligation to Will, whether he felt unsure about the situation or not. The older Seeker always wanted to operate under certainty. They were Seekers of Truth; if they did something with anything less than that, there was a high probability someone innocent would get hurt or someone guilty would get away. He needed to be certain and Alana wasn’t going to be able to give it to him. Hannibal was part of the problem, so Jack decided to go a step further; he made an appointment with the Baroness Bedelia du Maurier.

With her return to the decadence and tyranny of Val Royeaux and the Grand Game, the Baroness had worked to allow herself still some solitude. She could not avoid employing servants, but she did require that they not be able to enter certain parts of the estate. Jack was sure that some of them still went in and that her Ladyship was likely well aware of this fact (servants were the best spies after all), but the appearance of privacy often mattered more to some people. One such part of the estate was her private study, which is where she brought him now.

“Please,” her Ladyship said and gestured to one of the large chairs in the room. She went over to a small shelving unit that held several bottles of wine. She pulled out a White Seleny from Antiva and poured herself a generous serving before offering him some. Jack declined, wanting to keep his wits in top form around a formidable player of the Game.

“You said that you wished to understand Hannibal Lecter.”

“I do,” he replied. The man was someone that Will once admired and went to even before Jack and Beverly for advice and consolation. Yet, once Will started to understand the situation he was in, the young man blamed Comte Lecter for the murderers. Jack hoped that by understanding the noble, he could understand what happened with his protege. Lecter was closest to Will, on par with Beverly’s experiences with the young elf. What did Will see that made him shift blame onto the Comte or genuinely believe that he had committed those killings? “I suppose I want to start with his personality type; what kind of person is he?”

Madame du Maurier swirled her wine for a moment before taking a generous swig. “I suppose I would call him the social antisocial.”

“Meaning?” Jack prompted.

“He’s not easily influenced. I imagine you have that in common.” Something about the way she said it made it sound like an insult. Jack chose to ignore that for the moment, deciding it was best not to poke the bear, as it were.

“We do.”

“I would say that Hannibal’s capacity to be shaped by his social environment beyond his will seemed nonexistent until he met Will.”

That was an interesting idea. Jack would honestly have said something similar about Will once upon a time. “What was it about Will that would provoke that?”

The Baroness’s face may have been unreadable, but she proceeded to shrug. Actually shrug. Wonder of wonders, mystery of mysteries. The noblewoman was known for her inability to be anything less than inscrutable. “We are as much about ourselves as we are about those around us.”

“He saw himself in Will?”

She tilted her head, contemplating her next words carefully. Jack waited, knowing that she would speak when she felt like it and that half of his waiting was because she wanted to watch him squirm. “Will convinced Hannibal that he was seeing someone as unique as himself, just as he convinced you what Will you were seeing.”

That was a strange way to phrase it. ‘He convinced you what Will you were seeing.’ Was it that their confirmations about Will’s identity led to a certain bias for each other? “We both thought we knew him.”

The infernal mask on the top half of her face did nothing to betray her emotions, but he did see a slight downturn of the curl of her lips. It was too small to say for sure, but he got the feeling that she was irritated, or at least upset, with his conclusion. “You are not here to understand Hannibal. You are here to understand how you were fooled by Will.”

There was no need for him to argue, it would only confirm her own beliefs. Besides, she was wrong and wasn’t. A part of him rang true at her words; in his quest to become certain about Will, he was questioning the existence of his previous certainty. How had he attained it, when it clearly had been so wrong? “I suppose I am.”

“Did you see yourself in him?”

“I saw an asset and a friend.” Even family, to an extent. That was not her business though.

“Your mistake.” That hurt because of its accuracy. “Hannibal made mistakes too. Mistakes I believe he will continue to make, as he is still going to visit Will. To him, the young mage is an unfinished puzzle and it appears neither of you have given up trying to solve him.” So much venom was in her vehemence. He couldn’t blame her. Apparently she and Hannibal had been brought into the Game together, so it makes sense that she would not appreciate his poor decisions. There was a chance that the Baroness saw them as a reflection on her.

“I don't know if solve is the right word for it. I want to help, but I don’t know how. One minute I worry that he’s a monster, the next I worry that he isn’t.”

“Monsters are such strange creatures,” Bedelia said. “We define them because of our ideas of morality and their differences to us. They break a code inherent to us as people, but if one is born a monster, is that truly what they are? Can you call a thing a monster and hold them accountable by your standards and morality if they are just being themselves?”

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Will was wondering through the forest, wading through underbrush and small streams before leaping onto boulders and stumps. The quiet in this place was soothing, the animals of his mind hardly bothering him, content to live and let live. The elf wanted to let the comfortable silence smother him in his thoughts, so he looked for a place to close his eyes and let it cover him like a blanket. It was when he laid down in a soft pillow (at least to him) of moss that he heard it.

From what sounded like somewhere a small distance away, came the distinct sounds of someone choking. The animal whines and desperate grunts of someone desperate trying to breathe were further in and Will quickly sat up and stood to follow it. Once he began walking, the noise seemed to move as well. It was always at the same distance away, teasing his curiosity by dancing with his feet. He changed his walk into a run, yearning to understand what this noise meant and why it was here, in the safe places of his head.

The mage burst forth through the bushes, steering clear of paths to push ahead of whatever it was. Finally, he was in a clearing that, despite exhibiting the space between them, did still show the origin of his interest. It was him.

Rather, it was him as he looked a little more than a month ago. Bleeding into the trees around this figment was the shack he had been staying in, exactly the way it was in his memories with only one small difference: Will had never seen Hannibal in it. In hindsight, the man had been in his home alone several times, and that clearly was a mistake. Will had given him leave for his servants to be in there, but by this reading, Hannibal had been his house too and had probably tampered with his belongings.

The choking Will in front of him was out of it. His eyes were rolled back into his head and there were silent tears of his effort to clear his airway. The Comte hovered over him, gently caressing his throat and tilting his head back. He carefully placed an ear in his mouth before pulling out a small, clean metal implement. The implement’s end was touching the ear, standing vertically. Then, Hannibal pushed.

The implement sunk down, taking the ear with it. Figment-Will’s own choking got louder, and phantom pain in Dreaming-Will’s throat rose. In his mind, he could feel the ear travel down his windpipe, leaving him out of breath and ready to throw it back up, just barely not blocking the airway. The noble very perfunctorily pulled the implement out and tossed away without care. He stroked Figment-Will’s face before pulling away and the image faded. Two spirits left the space and flitted toward him. They danced around him, these spirits of Purpose, softly pressing against his mind before flying away.

His eyes opened, filled with the sense of righteousness that having a new memory brought.

It was evening. He ate, he was drained, and he slept, but the new memory carried him through the monotony. The cheerful laughter drifting through the window as young mages enjoyed the sunny summer day only fueled his frustration at being stuck in this place. This would have been the perfect weather for him to adventure through the woods, roll through the dirt and streams. Maybe he would have worked on some of the Creation or Spirit magic he had been cultivating. If Abigail was alive… if Abigail was alive, he would have taken her out and shown her herbs. Maybe he would have taught her fletching or they could have played with the Mabari.

He kept on imagining the perfect day, trying to ignore the moist and sticky damp he was forced to live in, his only light from a small window to the outside and the flickering torches in the hall when one of the Seekers opened the grate to check on him. It was during his meditations on a better life that Will was startled out of his reverie. He was prepared for Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell and her less than subtle machinations or Comte Hannibal Lecter and his pokes and prods. He was always ready for Chilton, though the man was a complete nuisance. Instead, Will got Jack.

The larger human man moved slowly and surely, face etched into a frown. Will simply stared at him, unsure how to respond to the Senior Seeker gracing him with his presence. There was a possibility that a verdict had been reached, despite some measures not being taken, and that Jack was there to take him to his final sentencing, but that seemed highly unlikely.

“Will?” Jack asked.

“Hi, Jack,” Will replied, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. “What are you doing here?”

Jack seemed uncomfortable. “I suppose I wanted to remind myself of who you were. See if I could remember the man I press ganged into my employ.”

“I remember that man,” Will replied, trying not to sound too bitter. There had been a necessary month of travel where he had not seen Jack, but the last week or so had been with Will in here. As far as he knew, Jack had been in the city as well; he could have seen Will at any time and not left him there to rot. “It’s strange, but memories are all I have now.” He gestured to the isolated room around him, just himself and a cot. “I managed to stumble across a new one today, which was nice. I was almost certain.” Will paused. “Almost. Certain. Hannibal Lecter did this to me. It’s a funny thing, doubt. Can infect your whole being.”

Jack stiffened and Will got the impression that he stumbled on an exposed nerve. “Doubt isn’t natural. We imprint on a version of the truth and have a hard time letting it go.”

“All I had was a feeling, nothing tangible,” Will said. “My entire being revolted against the idea that I did this and looked for a solution, but we are always in search of truth. I had to prove to myself that Hannibal was responsible in the absence of a single memory. I had nothing.”

“Had?” Jack asked, just like Will hoped he would. “You have something now, Will?”

“Yes.” He felt energized. Now he could tell someone that would listen to him about his memory. Jack, while he had not always agreed with or understood Will, had usually taken the time to at least listen to him. It turns out that perhaps that was too much to bet on.

“Memories are meaningless,” Jack said.

“Not for me,” Will retorted. “Hannibal wove his web so well. All he needed to do was convince you, get you to doubt. And you did.”

“We investigated his Lordship,” Jack told him back and his next words dropped tiny grenades. “We found nothing.”

“You let the fox in the henhouse,” Will accused, angry that Jack had stopped.

“Yes, I did.” Jack seemed resigned. His entire body slumped, made him seem smaller. The elf had never thought of Jack as small; his stature seemed designed to be imposing. “You stood over a dead girl’s body and described yourself to me.”

He tried to keep himself from yelling; it wasn’t going to help his case. “I described Hannibal Lecter.” He didn’t entirely succeed.

Jack waved him away and knocked on the iron door out of his cell. “I can’t hear this anymore.”

“Jack,” Will called as the door opened. Another drain overtook him and made him feel numb, even the tongue in his mouth. There was nothing in him that was going to let him speak.

“Goodbye, Will.” Then, the Seeker walked away. The slamming of the cell door vibrated through his entire body, leaving Will alone in the dark once again.

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Hannibal had been enjoying himself immensely through the last few nights. All of these pieces were turning, the motion endlessly circling his grand plan. The game had begun and the players were setting up their chessboards. It was a relief to find himself so in control of those around him. Will did so much to shake up his life that a few tugs to remind himself of his power was welcoming. Not that he didn’t adore the way that Will was unpredictable; Hannibal loved it. There was an excitement when he interacted with Will, a challenge that stimulated the underutilized muscles of his mind.

This was his first night since arriving in Val Royeaux that Hannibal did not have a dinner scheduled. It felt like lately he had been hosting an abundance of dinners to play catch up and get ahead of his rival. This kind of work required that the groundwork be laid early. He

couldn't afford to be sloppy and give himself away at the moment. Of course, now that everything is quiet, Hannibal was struck with the weight of newfound silence.

It was quiet. For several months prior to Will's incarceration, Hannibal had been living with Alana and Abigail in a very public capacity. He did live with Abigail, but she had to stay hidden to prevent a hapless servant or spy from stumbling across her. As long as he stayed in the main house, she couldn't speak to him. So, the Comte found himself enjoying the study on his own and he reminisced. Usually, on a night like this, there was always a chance that Will might pop up. He always did have a way of appearing at the best of times.

The two of them would talk, Hannibal enjoyed having access to that magnificent mind of his. It would be beautiful to have a simple moment to witness the inner-workings right now. They could discuss what Will felt when he realized what Hannibal had done; what he was feeling now. It would be a delicious conversation, stimulating in a way that other people simply are not. He missed the frenetic pacing, the way you could watch the movement of his thoughts. The morbid curiosity and understanding that punctuated their interactions.

Will was not here though. He was not going to be.

Not anytime soon.

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Of all of the visitors that Will expected to have, Beverly was not one of them. Jack had felt like less of a surprise. From all of the things that Alana had told him about how she was handling the situation to their parting to the fact that it had taken her *this* long to visit, Will had given up.

When she arrived, he had actually been lying down. The nightmares had been increasing and some part of him hoped that if he spaced out his sleep schedule, they would never even have a chance to start. It startled him when the door opened, no warning from the peeping tom grate (he had taken to calling it that). Beverly walked in like she was on a mission and placed a chair in the room for her to sit. It was very very late in the evening, the night starting to envelope the sky.

Will rolled up, watching as she kept a careful distance from the bars and the sound of the locking mechanism slid back in place, leaving them alone. They sat for a moment, neither saying anything at all. Finally, he broke into a smile, "It's good to see you."

Her face did not change, not even a twitch. She was taking him in, analyzing every part of him; he'd seen her do it plenty of times before. It was the face she made when she wanted to know if someone had something they were trying to hide. His friend had never done it to him before. "I still don't know what I feel about seeing you." He realized that she was clutching something in her hands. It was… Will wasn't sure what it was. "Does Jack know you're here?"

Beverly flinched. "No."

"I'm surprised."

She sighed and unfolded slightly, allowing the package she was clutching to be glimpsed. It was paper, he thought. “Jack won’t be. I’m compartmentalizing.” The Seeker glanced down at her bundle and took a steadying breath. “A lot of people are missing.”

Oh. This was business then. That… hurt a lot more than it should have. Will knew that their friendship was in tatters; why would she come to see him? “Does what you’re holding have something to do with it?”

“Yes.”

He sighed and held out his hand through the bars. For a few blinks, Beverly did not move, but she eventually huffed and gingerly placed the bundle in his outstretched hand. It was… a lot heavier than paper. I took him a few moments to realize that what he was holding was the binding of a book holding together a sheaf of skins, swatches cut thinly and precisely into squares. Will pulled it through, fighting to keep his face blank and not letting it pull into a horrified expression.

“This is-”

“We found it alongside six bodies of female victims. They were all dumped in the river. Almost made it out to the Waking Sea before they were caught in the net of an unfortunate fisherman.”

“Can you tell me about them?”

Beverly slumped in her chair. “They were all noblewomen, fairly pretty. Definitely the type that look like they hadn’t worked a day in their lives, but they were unknown enough that no one missed them in the Game. Odds are they were the wives of well off merchants, just barely able to play. We’ve conducted a few interviews and it seems that they disappeared from their homes. The servants only mentioned that the ladies seemed invested in a new project before they disappeared.”

“Project?” Will asked, face scrunching up in anticipatory disgust. He had a feeling he knew what Beverly meant by that.

Beverly rolled her eyes, “They seemed to be obsessed with helping some unfortunate soul.” The last two words were said with the shrill affectation of a poncy Orlesian accent. They were clearly the words someone had said to her before, probably referring to her.

“So you are wanting to know what kind of person goes after pretty noblewomen of lower rank and skins them, then puts it in a book?” He tried to say it as nastily as he could. Will wanted to poke at her, play into her newfound perception of him to hurt her. Instead, it simply came out tired. He was tired a lot lately.

“It’s not just that. They seem to be missing teeth, nails, and hair as well. The skin is only coming from specific parts of the body on each individual, not the whole thing.” That was gross. What could this individual possibly want from these women?

“Tell me what you see,” Beverly said.

He closed his eyes to drift away, clutching the book of skin swatches in his hand and praying to the Creators that this wouldn't affect him like all of the others. He saw, and he told.

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Nesiraya was back from her mission, if only for a brief moment. The moment that Abigail learned the elf was back in the estate, she went for her. The last period of time had been torture. She was only allowed into certain places of the Chateau, which made this all very difficult. So many people, going back and forth just out of reach. One time, she was trapped in the side of a secret passage, stuck near a wall, because there was someone just on the other side. Abigail hadn't been able to move for ten minutes or they would have heard her, as attentive as they were. The enforced isolation and stealth was starting to kill her. Yesterday, she had just stayed in her room. It felt like it would be too much effort to move elsewhere in the estate within the estate.

The moment she learned Nesiraya was back, Abigail shadowed her. The second that the bard was in a room alone, Abigail knocked on the wall to get her attention. Nesiraya smiled and left, going to the secret door. They embraced once she was on the other side, but Nesiraya informed her that she wouldn't be staying long.

"What?" Abigail asked, feeling vulnerable.

The elven woman sighed sadly, "I'm sorry. I am unable to stay. Hannibal has me on another mission coming up. I'm only here for a few moments."

"But I-" she began. "I thought you were going to be here. I thought I wasn't going to be alone."

"You're not alone!" Nesiraya rushed to say. It felt a little too quick. "You have Hannibal."

"I have Hannibal when he decides to come and speak with me." He hadn't even been doing it everyday. A good portion of the day, it was just Abigail up here. Alone. She felt like she was going crazy. A large part of her longed to speak to someone. Anyone would do at this point!

The bard leaned forward and enveloped Abigail in a hug. The comfort of another person holding her sunk in, warmth and contentment spreading throughout her. It didn't last long as Nesiraya had to let go. She held the girl at arm's length, clasping her shoulders. "It will be fine. Hopefully, I won't be gone for long." A quick stroke up and down her arms to gentle her, and then Abigail was left by herself. She already knew that Hannibal would not be visiting that night.

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It was the middle of the night when Will heard it. Footsteps gently pattering down the hall to his door and the door opening wide. There were a few moments when he thought that it was just a dream or maybe his imagination. He did have an active one after all. The meeting with Beverly today only confirmed that he still had it. Speaking of his meeting with Beverly, Will still felt the sting of her coolness. Alana never acted like that when she visited, and he didn't know her half as well. Jack's personal feelings welled up during their conversation, but

Beverly acted like it was just business. The rest of the conversation between them had been perfunctory and unpleasant, so he tried not to dwell too much on it. It was difficult, knowing that your relationship with your best friend was ruined, especially when the ruin came from a lie told by a malevolent ass. May the Dread Wolf take him.

He tried to settle into sleep, but there was this feeling in the back of his mind. It was like he was being watched. His mind spun as it conjured images of Templars, of spirits and demons. The prickles along his spine continued and he shut his eyes tighter. It reminded him of when he was a child and the Clan went through a ‘haunted’ forest. Will had spent every night in his bed roll, doing his best not to look into the woods and thinking that if he didn’t see it, there was nothing there. When he did fall asleep, the demons made sure he felt it all over again. Soon, the demons pounding in his skull and lurking behind his eyes became more frightening than anything the haunted forest could put him through. The moment that came to pass, the young Will almost gave up sleep entirely before he passed out one day from exhaustion.

It occurred to him, then, that this reaction was out of the ordinary. Will hadn’t thought the world outside was scarier than his dreams in years and another thought prodded soon after. There was no way that this incident should incite that kind of reaction. He thought that he had imagined the door opening, but he never actually checked to see if it was open or closed. The elf jerked up, off of the small cot and stared. What he saw confused him further.

The door wasn’t open, but the room on the other side of the bars had been disturbed. There was nothing missing (there wasn’t anything to take) and no one had defaced the walls in some way. No, what was changed was that someone brought in something. In the minute or so that he had clamped his eyes shut and curled into his blanket, someone had snuck into the room and placed something on the floor, in easy reach for someone on his side of the bars.

Will prowled across the floor and approached the item. It was small, barely a fistful, and looked like it was made of clay. He didn’t think there was anything magical about it, but you never knew. Maybe, if something magical was the problem, the Templars would rush into the room to solve the problem, unless it was a way for him to escape, in which case he didn’t want them to have an inkling. Reaching through the bars, Will almost stopped when his fingers brushed against the item. It was cold, not terribly so but like someone had left it exposed in the air of the dungeon for too long. He wrapped and hand around it and pulled it closer before taking a good look at it.

It was a small, clay figurine of a Mabari hound, freshly made.

Chapter End Notes

Fenedhis lasa: A common elven curse. No literal translation.
EDIT I just learned that this curse roughly translates to 'go suck a wolf's dick'. You're welcome.

Sa'vunin

Chapter Summary

> Do you know what I remember? When [my father] read to me. Stupid things, dragons and heroes. He wouldn't turn a page until I reached over and took his hand. That big man made every step of the story my choice. I loved that. He died of the wasting, in a Denerim ward. Those last weeks I read to him. I had to take his hand to turn the pages. And I couldn't tell if he was too weak, or if it was the old game…No one tells you how to mourn. And when someone says, "move on", you take their hand and say "my choice." - Aveline Vallen

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
> Sa'vunin: One more day
>
> I felt the title was appropriate, both for the chapter and for the general zeitgeist/crisis. I changed the summary quote for this chapter about six times, because nothing quite felt right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was strange, but Will felt relaxed. Perhaps relaxed would be the wrong word for it, but he lacked the vocabulary to really call it anything else. All of his anxieties, stresses, and cares had flown away, leaving his head in a pleasant bubble of warmth and fuzziness. Any attempts at truly wondering about his state of mind were brushed aside and torn through like wet parchment. The halls of the White Spire stretched before him, free of obstacles. A few mages walked to and fro from different rooms, some going to storage, the library, a class, but none of them acknowledged him.

They would look; some would even stare when they thought he couldn't see him. Once upon a time, Will might have made a comment about his ears, either to defuse the tension or to suss out whether or not that was the problem. Now, he said nothing and walked past them. Their attention didn't bother him, neither did their pointing or averted gazes.

A templar grabbed his arm and began steering him in a different direction. Idly, Will saw the bruises forming under his skin, but he said nothing. There wasn't a point in reminding them that he should remain unharmed as it could hamper his abilities. The Knights dragged him to another part of the Circle that he hadn't been to before. It was dark and those here threw him

at a pile of books and left the elf there. He was very good at research, especially with spirits. Maybe he liked them before.

What he was before didn't matter now. He was calm. Even-keel. Tranquil.

He turned his head to the side and saw his reflection in the window, just the barest hints in the pane of glass. On his forehead was a large symbol, the lyrium brand on his mind in the shape of a sunburst. He fel tap on his shoulder and looked into his own face, in a parody of mage robes combined with Templar armor. Under other circumstances, this revelation may have startled him, but the nothing continued. Other handed him a large iron brand, white hot blue on the end in the shape of a sunburst. Will-as-he-was took the rod and carefully turned it in his hands so that the brand faced himself. Other Will held the end of the iron steady for him as Will-as-he-was slowly burned the lyrium brand into his forehead and kept pushing until the bright pain of it seared more than his skin.

Will woke gasping, feeling his forehead for what he was sure was the burn mark of the Chantry. He wheezed while he tried to take in breaths, his entire body shaking from the nightmare. At his pointed ears, small whispers of how he could prevent that future if he only listened, maybe even made a bargain. All that needed to be said was yes. The elf waved, as if he could physically dissipate the noise. The clanking of metal sounded from somewhere down the hall in his isolated little part of the Circle dungeon; it appeared that he woken up just in time for visitors.

They had moved him down to one guard at a time. Granted, Will's guard was a Seeker again, not a couple of Templars. Apparently, one of the previous guards had an incident where he forgot to take lyrium and was ratted out by his partner. The Templar was reprimanded, and it was decided by the Knight Vigilant and Lord Seeker Prurnell that the Seekers would once again oversee him. The Templar in question was the one that enjoyed kicking him through the bars, so the revelation left Will in a jolly mood.

That was until one of his Seeker guards neglected to drain him of his mana and magic. It was suspicious, and that was putting it mildly. He was left wondering exactly what kind of game this idiot was playing, as Seekers tended to be more vigilant in general around him. It probably came from the fact that he was originally working with the organization and they felt they had a duty to ensure his compliance and eventual punishment. What made it even more worrisome was that right after Will noticed his mana trickle back, both Comte Hannibal Lecter and Novice Seeker Alana Bloom walked into his cell.

Both of them looked uncomfortable, which immediately told Will that they hadn't meant to arrive together. While they both had lived together for months, he had gathered that their friendship had grown less close since Alana joined the Seekers. She was a very busy woman now, and they no longer co-habitated (much to Will's relief). It was more likely that they had simply selected to come at the same time by chance and his guard decided to stick both of them in the room with him… while he had magic.

Yes. It was quite unnerving and only served to make him paranoid.

Well. More paranoid. After the little Mabari figurine, Will had begun to sleep worse, if that was even possible. There was something about the knowledge that someone had managed to

sneak into his space without waking or alerting him in some fashion. That fucking iron door made a considerable amount of noise. The whole mess left him on edge.

Nevertheless, there was a more immediate issue to attend to: his guests. Will had had a few days to consider his approach, should another person decide he was worth visiting. Each of them had come seeking something different, and Will was a little ashamed at how he dealt with all of them. The only one where he had ended the conversation in some positive position was with Beverly, and the key difference in that conversation was that he had given her something that she wanted. So, Will decided that if the only way to gain some sort of advantage was to play into what a person wanted or needed at that moment, he would.

Alana needed someone that needed to be saved. Will also wanted to make up for his behavior during their last conversation; he hadn't been at his best and had taken it out on her. Hannibal needed someone to compete against. The only problem was now both of them were in the room with him, which made this slightly more difficult. As they all stared at each other, waiting for someone to make the first move, the captive elf had to determine which person he would benefit more from playing into their perceptions. In a snap, he knew where he would go.

Will allowed the moment to stretch out a little longer and strained his eyes. The effort caused his face to scrunch up, which only really aided him in his little charade. He allowed the residual feelings from his nightmare to sink under his skin, the panic of waking sure that he had been made Tranquil (despite the fact that Tranquil couldn't panic). Slowly, the force of it made the area around his eyes to tingle and grow warmer as they watered, several drops to bead around his lids and fall slowly down his cheeks. He made a choking whine, which generated a wetness in the back of his throat, cloying his voice. He could feel his face heating and going red and finally released his hold on the stress that had plagued him since he arrived. The weight of his situation crashed down on his shoulders and the dam burst forth. He was crying.

"I'm so sorry," the mage sobbed out, saliva building up on his tongue. "I'm so sorry about everything. I feel like the plot is slipping through my fingers; I can't even grasp my own story. I'm struggling to maintain my dignity and control. I took it out on the both of you."

His audience stood at least a few feet from the bars. Alana's face fell, despairing herself at the situation she found her former friend in. Will needed to play to her. Hannibal would see this for what it was, probably, and that meant Will would still accomplish his goal of being seen as an amusement, if not an equal. Any sort of challenge on his part to the both of them might further alienate Alana. While he couldn't necessarily find any sort of way to gain an advantage with her as an ally, he still needed a friend. She was the only one that had visited him without an agenda. "I have no bearings, no landmarks to tell me where and who I am. I want to have that again."

Alana despaired, moved by his plight. "You have an incomplete self. We are who we are in the now and we are the sum of our memories; memories were taken from you. There were pieces of time, extended moments, where you couldn't exist, didn't exist. There was no now for you to have then. Those little pieces of you that are missing, you can't see."

He swallowed, a little struck by her words. She might not have the complete picture, but she was right. One memory did not give him back all of those times Will had woken up somewhere completely different from where he started. Who knows what Hannibal and potentially the spirit or demon that had been attached to him had done during that time. “I’m afraid to see. Everything that happened corrupted who I was and who I am. I’m afraid.”

“Without remembering, you’re seized by something imagined,” Comte Lecter replied, and Will had to fight to not shout out that his Lordship would know the facts from the fiction. Whether he knew it or not, the noble held Will’s true experiences hostage and Will would have them back. Instead, the prisoner hung his head and fought to contain his anger. Then, he noticed something odd on the human’s face; he appeared to be somewhat buying it.

“I don’t know what’s worse: believing that I did it or that you did it to me?” Guilt or betrayal. Both were such potent emotions.

Alana stepped forward, just within grabbing range. Will wouldn’t do anything to her, to either of them. He didn’t need to give the Seeker monitoring him and likely this conversation fuel for abuse or stories later. “Hannibal’s not responsible for this, Will, and neither are you.”

“Betrayal is - was all that felt real to me. I needed to trust you. I did trust you.” He turned to Hannibal, the words falling from his mouth were potent truths. If it was possible that Hannibal believed him, even like this, then he had more power in this situation than he thought. “I felt like I could tell you anything and now I can’t.”

Hannibal joined Alana. “You can. I’m still an open ear, someone that you can trust.”

Will winced, truly in anger, but it probably came across as guilt or another form of self-reflection. The broken bird was afraid of a stranger’s touch no matter how gentle. “I’m… very confused.”

“Of course you are! We’re here to help you, Will. All of these ideas and experiences ripple our minds, like a rock tossed into a pond. Let us settle it.”

“Let us help you,” Hannibal said and Will bristled despite himself. It was only for a moment and he quickly got it back under control. “Let me help you.”

Will’s entire body clenched in anger and in an effort to control himself. Through gritted teeth, he managed to say, “I need your help.” Then, he carefully closed in on himself, one part of his body at a time. Will didn’t speak again, letting the tears flow freely down his face, until they both left.

Carefully, his being unclenched and the muscles relaxed from their twisted positions. The padded steps of his visitors echoed down the hall when they were well into the distance and Will’s body opened up again. His face was still hot and sticky from crying, so he tried to soothe the irritation in any way he could. The performance was over and he could return to himself again.

In his heart, Will knew the game was just beginning. He had taken his first step, made his first move. It wouldn’t be long until Hannibal caught up and shifted a few pieces of his own.

If only Will had a partner, someone to play off of. His Lordship had been at this dance for a while and probably could take the steps in his sleep, without thought or care to the potential consequences. He was only just learning the basics, but this little charade had bought him some time.

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Jack turned over in his bed, resigned to the fact that this was another night of sleep gone. All he could think about was the fact that in the coming days, the Knight Vigilant in conjunction with the Lord Seeker would be discussing what they were going to do with Will. The tension had built under his skin and, at this point, Jack just wanted it to be over. There was only so much he could take anymore; he was far too old to lose another teammate, especially one that he had been hoping to take under his wing. If it had gone on long enough, the Seeker had hoped to convince Prurnell to allow Will to join their ranks. There had never been a Seeker mage as far as he knew and he would have been proud to make Will their first.

A gentle tap played on his shoulders and Jack felt them relax despite himself. “Good morning Jack,” Bella greeted, sounding amused and worried all at once. “I’m assuming that you didn’t have a good night’s sleep.”

Jack sighed and turned around to face the love of his life. She had been getting steadily weaker, thinner. He was happy that Will’s hounds came with them because it gave her a reason to go out in the sun. She laughed at him and said that she wasn’t a plant, she didn’t need sunlight to live, but Jack thought otherwise. There was a reason it was called ‘fresh air’, even if it didn’t always smell that way. “I did not.”

Bella’s smile was sad, as most of hers were now. “You were thinking about the investigation and Will, weren’t you?”

“You know me well, my love.”

She took one of his hands and kissed them. “I know you feel you need to be strong for your team, but talking would help. You are my husband and you don’t need to put up a front for me, so talk to me.” He sought the words for a moment, trying to dismiss her worries or find a place to start. After watching him, slightly entertained even at his floundering, Bella saved him from finding a beginning, as she always did. “I understand, anxiety on your part is to be expected.”

“I’m not anxious,” Jack corrected.

Bella took no prisoners and would brook no liars. “I would be anxious if I were you.”

“I wouldn’t call it anxiety, then,” he pressed. “Anticipation, perhaps? I think I just want it to be over.”

“What the Lord Seeker might say doesn’t bother you?” she asked.

Jack shook his head and leaned forward to create their own space. “Their scrutiny has never bothered me before.”

She didn't allow him too close, keeping him at a distance during this conversation. The Seeker realized that she was utilizing her 'ambassador' voice on him; he had heard it plenty of times to recognize it. Bella apparently thought this conversation vital enough that she wasn't going to allow silly romantic distractions in their conversation. It was disappointing, he could use silly distractions right now. Bella continued, "What about their empathy?"

Empathy? Such a strange thought, others looking at him and feeling his situation, or was she considering what those that were going to be looking at this case in the Chantry might say while understanding his situation? She did mention scrutiny prior and how they would be looking at him during all of this. It was one thing to recognize what another was going through and another to literally feel it; if there was anything Will taught him, it was that. "I'm not going to mistake understanding for empathy. I can realize that somebody can understand me without knowing me." He trailed off slightly. "It's not easy to know another person."

Bella laughed and smiled. Marriage was like knowing another person in every way possible, and both of them knew that it wasn't easy. It was a relationship that required constant and consistent work, something they had both been working on in recent months. That isn't to say that they had a bad relationship before, but they both had become so busy with their own lives that they had forgotten how to be together for longer than a month. The disease had forced them to communicate more and had reignited their devotion for each other. Bella nodded, "Sometimes I think it's easier to understand someone if you don't know them."

Maker, he hated it when she was right. Mostly. She was in this instance; when looking at a stranger, you can see the threads of their actions, the clear cause and effect. You don't have to worry about prior behavior or personal interpretations that suffered from being too close to see the bigger picture. He remembered the hurt and confusion when they first had to deal with the illness and how long it had taken him to see it. Bella's amusement petered out and she suddenly looked very serious. "Jack. How well did you know Will?"

That wasn't an easy question to answer by any means. "Before or after I shot him?"

"Yes I think is the answer."

Jack laid back to stare up at the ceiling and collected his thoughts on the matter. "Before I shot him? I thought I knew him pretty well. I thought he was my friend and maybe could be family, especially as a part in our little one. After… after I wondered if I ever knew him at all."

"You weren't prepared for that," she concluded.

"No. I wasn't." He sniffed and felt as she wrapped his arm in hers, allowing the seeping of her warmth to remind him that he wasn't alone in his own mind. "I was trained to prepare instincts, reactions, gestures, get them by heart so I could act even when I am uncertain or in doubt."

"Are you prepared?"

"For the investigation? No." Now it was Jack's turn to laugh. "I suppose I am anxious about it. Who would have thought?"

“What are they trying to do? Execution? Tranquility?”

Jack turned back, knowing that Bella cared about his next words just as much as he did. His love may not have had as much interaction with Will as the others, but she cared about all of his squadmates deeply and thought of them as her own. He wasn’t about to spare her this; it would only enrage her. “I don’t know. I think that’s what has me like this. I’m afraid that Will is going to die and I still won’t know who he is: guilty or innocent. My last certain act with him was shooting him. It was the only thing I could do in that moment to help him and I haven’t been able to help him since.”

Bella kissed his cheek, “You have been helping me.”

“Have I?” he asked. “Here you are, being a set of ears for me while my mouth keeps yapping. You have your own problems.”

“We are a pair, a singular unit.”

Jack kissed her back. “You should still feel free to talk to me.”

“I might find someone,” Bella replied. “But I confess that it probably shouldn’t be you. I might need an ear a little more separate from the issue.”

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The body was rough.

That was Alana’s first thought upon seeing what were apparently the remains of Rolandre de Ombre, the wife of a prominent textile merchant. So far, she was their most high-profile victim to date and the most grotesque. Not only was all of her hair and teeth gone, but the nails and large patches of skin and in its place were actual pieces of cloth sewn in. The skull was also heavily bashed in. The body was in a completely different part of the small river surrounding Val Royeaux and the method of death was different, so they almost missed it. Luckily, a nearby Templar that was familiar with their case was also nearby and recognized the mutilations that had taken place prior to death.

“See this,” Jack indicated. Alana noticed that he was sporting large bags under his eyes and a slightly manic look, as if he was keeping himself awake on sheer force of will alone. Her morning had started with a visit to Will, which hadn’t left her in a much better state of mood. “Whatever our killer wanted from this one, the lack must’ve angered him greatly. It was apparently enough that he had to bash in her skull.”

“It was also somewhere else, which is strange,” Jimmy chimed in. “Is he trying to confuse us to keep his location a secret?”

Brian joined in as well, moving smoothly around Alana and she tried to get out of Jimmy’s way. Beverly gave her a thumbs-up once again, trying to be supportive. She was still trying to understand her place among the group and where that left her. Alana’s specialty wasn’t exactly speaking with spirits and extrapolating their knowledge and forms onto bodies to give evidence. She didn’t understand death or biology the way that Brian did or magic and rituals

like Jimmy. Beverly served as Jack's right hand and the minder for the other two, while still giving plenty of ideas. Honestly, Alana felt like a spare, an intruder, outside looking in.

"We know that she was dead when she hit the water," Brian told the rest of them. "We checked the lungs, but they were dry. It took a minute to see how much of the damage was from the killer and what was from the buffeting current and the rocks."

"Have we checked under the clothes for any hints?" Alana said. "It is strange that someone would bother to sew onto the bodies."

"Not yet, but we'll get onto that as soon as possible." This was Beverly, managing her plan of action. "I'm not what might help, but there has to be something, maybe debris or a rare plant? It could be just a way for us to understand the killer's brain."

"We understand what the victim's have in common, but what does our killer gain by mutilating and taking from their bodies?"

Beverly stepped towards Jack and pulled out the drawings. "It could be that we are focusing too much on the victims here. Instead of thinking about what's so special about the victims that would make the killer take from them, think about what the killer wants for themselves." Alana was slightly confused at the differentiation. Wasn't that the same thing?

Jack raised an eyebrow and everyone else in the room stared at Beverly, so she wasn't alone in her confusion. "Think about it. These are all moderately rich and beautiful women," Beverly eyed the corpse. "Or, they were before death. Plenty of people would target them for being all three of those things. They all look fairly similar so our killer has a type. I think, for one, that our killer might be a woman as well and that her taking these things for herself has less to do with an obsession for a specific person. At least, a specific other person. It could be that the reason she wants these things is because she thinks she needs them and not in an obsessive sense."

Beverly pointed towards the bald head of one victim. "Hair is used for wigs." Then she gestured towards the teeth. "For those with poor hygiene, teeth are often the first to go." The skin. "Perhaps it's degrading enough that make-up doesn't work and the reason the victims all have the same skin tone is the same reason people try out powders." Finally, the half-elf gently picked up the hands and exhibited the shredded ends of Rolandre's fingers. "Manicured nails are all the rage currently." She turned back to the rest of the group and opened up her arms. "To our killer, they're not people. They're cosmetics, and there are going to be more."

Alana looked around the room at the rest of them, feeling comfortable enough to observe the squad. Brian and Jimmy suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable and Jack was staring at Beverly with constrained and vexed single-mindedness. "Strange," Jack replied. "For a moment, I thought that Will was back with us." Beverly appeared slightly shamed and gave an embarrassed shrug to Alana, who just shook her head. "Beverly," Jack called out. "Perhaps we should take a little walk to my office."

As they left, Alana mouthed, "Sorry," and abandoned her to her fate at the hands of Jack Crawford.

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Beverly stuck her tongue out at Alana as she walked with Jack, headings towards the teacher's office. Already, she could tell that she was in so much trouble. The minute the door closed behind her and she was left alone with Jack, Beverly saw her mentor and boss visibly deflate. He was gazing out of the window of his office here in the Spire, towards where Beverly assumed his rough estimate of the dungeons beneath would be.

"How's Will?" Jack asked, an extremely complicated question from where she was standing. Just when she started to explain herself, he interrupted, "Shut your mouth." The senior between the two of them turned back to her, making eye contact so that she could see how upset he was. "Is there a reason you didn't come to me before talking to him?"

Several, most of them things she didn't feel comfortable talking about. First and foremost, how she felt about her former friend was extraordinarily complicated. For a long time, Beverly thought that Will was one of the few people that understood her. They could talk about anything for hours, and often did, much to the detriment of her sleep schedule. He didn't judge her and she tried her best to not make any calls on his behalf in turn. Will didn't like feeling like an invalid or a burden, he didn't like people treating him like he hadn't been living on and off by himself for a few years. He was around her age and she knew that she barely tolerated her family hovering over her.

That was whom she had thought Will was anyway. Under her not-so-watchful eye, Will had also managed to kill five people, either aware on unaware. Did any of it matter? Was any of it true? It was very possible that her confidente was a lie, a persona adopted for the sake of fooling the 'flat-ear'. If that wasn't the case and the Will she spoke to was real, that begged the question of how much did she miss. Beverly knew that Will wasn't at his best; he admitted it, and yet she hadn't reported anything. Would she have saved lives (including Will's) by not respecting his boundaries? The shame that accompanied these thoughts and possibilities prevented her from asking Jack, lest her caution hold her back. There was a very real chance that not just going to see him would have led to her making excuse after excuse until he was dead or might as well be.

Instead, Beverly told Jack the other reason that she hadn't brought it up to him. "I figured you'd say no."

He furrowed his brow and replied, "You figured correctly."

"But you'd want to say yes."

Jack sighed at her the same way her mother did when she looked before leaping. Beverly liked to think that was something she had in common with Jack most of the time, but this ordeal had him taking a few tentative steps towards the edge before backing away entirely. "You knew that?" He sounded so exasperated too, as if she didn't know him well enough to see the truth.

"You put me in an awkward position. I had to go because we weren't getting results and I knew that you wouldn't. You think you need to save face and you need to separate yourself,

but if you had gone like you wanted, then I wouldn't have had to," Beverly explained. She idled for a moment as Jack stared at her. "Why didn't you?"

She could have sworn that a blood vessel looked ready to pop, but Jack kept his voice level. "Will is either a monster or delusional and was strongly under the control of one, neither of which I can trust in this moment."

"And?" Beverly prompted, but Jack didn't comment further. "Fine! So you don't trust him. You can still listen to him."

Jack spoke to her slowly, "I am listening." She just knew he wasn't going to budge which is ridiculous. Sure, Beverly may not have gotten the closure that she needed from her visit to Will, but some personal issues should not get in the way of solving the case. Jack was being stubborn. "This is what I am hearing, Beverly. If he was a monster, then everything my gut says about him is wrong. If he was under the control of one, then I pushed him towards that and I allowed it to happen without notice."

There was something else he wasn't saying; a third option that presented itself. Beverly didn't think that she agreed with it, but it did explain some of the behavior Jack was exhibiting. "You think there's a chance that he's innocent."

Jack kept stressing his words, "I don't know what I think." Was it really possible that Will didn't actually do any of those things? If Will was framed, there would be a trace, some evidence. Still, it wasn't the time or place for them to go on wild goose chases; they had hard facts sitting somewhere in the building, ready to be looked over. If what she heard was correct, it would be happening soon.

If there was anything that Beverly knew about Will, it was this: "I think he still wants to save lives. Whether his motives are based in some part of himself or vanity, I think that he still does."

"And I've bent the rules to save lives," Jack pointed out. "I know I haven't told you all, but they are looking into my position too, Lord Seeker Prurnell has said as much."

She hadn't known. "I'm sorry, Jack." The half-elf sighed, trying to find the words to convince him to allow this, but if he was under scrutiny, it wasn't worth it. She wouldn't risk his calling over this. "If you don't want me to go back, I won't." She had nothing else to say.

"We didn't have this conversation." He was shifting stances. "And since we didn't have this conversation, you should do whatever you believe it is your job to do." He waved vaguely in the air the way that he did when he was making fun of something. "Do you know what your job is?"

Smirking, Beverly replied, "I do."

Jack shrugged and smiled back, resigned and tired yet still smiling. "Then do it."

Beverly didn't go back to Will at first, although she kept it in mind for later. The only new information that they had was the stuff that Will gave to them. For the moment, that would

have to do. Knowing that she had permission to go back (more or less) and learning about Jack's feelings on the matter helped her somewhat. It granted her a bit of perspective.

No. The first thing that she did was march right up to Alana. Her friend had been eyeing her during the whole debacle and deserved a clear answer (although she suspected Alana knew already). The Seeker Novice made her escape from Jimmy and Brian as soon as she realized that Alana was there and sidled up close. "So…" Alana drawled. "Been to see Will lately?"

Beverly smacked Alana lightly in the shoulder. "Why'd you have to say it like that?"

"Because apparently you went off without telling anyone. Beverly! It doesn't matter what you believe or don't believe about Will; Going to see him without permission from Jack reflects poorly on you." Alana asked worriedly.

Beverly retorted, "You go to see him plenty enough."

"I've gone twice. Besides, I can get away with it because I'm just a novice. I'm allowed to be stupid. I've also been open about how I want to help him, so I'm trying to communicate with him to see what I can do." She muttered, "Lot of good that's done me."

Beverly rolled her eyes. Alana had made sure to tell her about the disaster that was her and Will's initial conversation plenty before. Naturally, Will would be snappy because he didn't like his odds; it made sense enough to her, psychopath or no. "No one seemed to know about it prior to this conversation."

"They had Templars and now Seekers guarding his cell," Alana said, irritated. "Someone was going to find out and you're lucky that Jack did first."

"I'm planning to go back as soon as we have more information about this body. I want to do some more digging." Beverly continued, "That's also why I wanted to talk to you."

"Not just because we're friends?" Alana teased and Beverly smacked at her again. This time, the brunette managed to dodge the slap and laughed at her failure.

"Not just because we're friends," Beverly teased back, giving her voice a mocking slimy sound. In her normal voice, Beverly said, "Look, you know Hannibal Lecter really well. He's Nevarran. I was just wondering if he might know anything about Mortalitasi techniques when it comes to slowing the decay of corpses."

Alana pointed out, rightly, "There are spells that do that."

"Jimmy checked for me when we first brought it in. No magic." Beverly gave an apologetic look, "Sorry, I guess we were so caught up we forgot to tell you."

"Just remember to do it next time."

"Of course. Anyway, I know for a fact that some Mortalitasi still perform mummification rituals to ensure that their magic isn't the only thing keeping the corpses from falling apart."

“I was going to say that just because he’s Nevarran doesn’t mean that he knows anything about the Mortalitasi.” Alana sighed, looking fond despite herself. “But, I know for a fact that he was a big student of the organization and was fascinated by the practice. If there’s anyone that would know anything, it would be him.”

“It’s settled then. Can you run interference?”

Alana looped her arm in Beverly’s and smiled, the both of them leaving the Seeker section of the White Spire and travelling to the Val Royeaux property of Comte Hannibal Lecter. “Naturally. You thought for a second that I was going to let you do this without me?”

“Not a chance,” Beverly replied, making sure that her elbow was snug in Alana’s. Together they continued the trek, walking step in step, side-by-side.

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It was one of the better days for Abigail. She had been working on learning different codes and stuff to create her own language with Hannibal. Day in and day out of living in the walls and secret servant rooms (that even they didn’t seem to know about) with only the Comte and a few spiders for company made life very dull. It had only taken her a day or two after Nesiraya left for her to start playing pranks. Some of them were less harmless than others. For instance, some of the servants that she knew were spying on Hannibal were now convinced that the man was haunted and refused to come back. When they stopped showing up, Abigail was sure that the man would be upset, but he encouraged her trickery.

He had taught her about people watching back when she was allowed to stand next to him, so the young woman also had been putting those skills to the test. The servants saw and heard everything because nobles didn’t typically bother to think about them, but they themselves were also notorious gossips. Abigail was kind enough to share some of the more exciting information with Hannibal when she came across it. For all of the words that she heard or the people she saw, no one brought her anything about Will. Hannibal outright refused to talk about it or would obfuscate it behind vague and useless words.

It took a moment for Abigail to notice it, but some of the servants in the kitchen were whispering about the Comte having visitors and from the Templars no less! As soon as Abigail heard that, she quietly dashed to the study, where Hannibal seemed to bring anyone that wasn’t dining or being dined on. To her immense delight, the guests in question were Alana and Beverly.

Memories swelled of days playing with the Mabari hounds in the shack back in Red Crossing while Beverly and Will would occasionally spout out an elven phrase for her to remember later. Nights inside Hannibal’s suite in the Winter Palace when Alana and Abigail would eat and listen to the music going on from the festivities below. Beverly had been sort of a friend once, but Alana was a sister verging on a mother. Seeing her, right there just across from her and unable to reach or talk, hurt.

Abigail could see through the peephole she had made in the wall that Alana was dressed in Seeker armor, which made Abigail proud. Despite their secretive (and once secret) nature, the Divine’s warriors were highly regarded and just as highly feared by those that did know of

them. Before the business with her father, Abigail had not known that they even existed and here she was praising a loved one for joining. From what she could hear, they were asking for Hannibal's aid in investigating a murder. Presumably, it wasn't one of Hannibal's as far as Abigail was aware, but she didn't exactly get out much.

Naturally, he agreed. If there was one thing that she had learned about her guardian, it was that he was insatiably curious, even if it was to his detriment. Abigail followed the two women as she left, hoping that there would be some sort of further news about their affairs. Before she could stop herself, the young woman knocked on the wall, "I miss you."

Alana turned, startled by the noise, but Beverly put her back on track. Abigail wasn't sure if she was relieved or not by their parting.

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Hannibal leaned forward, looking carefully at the stitches on the body and the preservatives that had been applied to the skin. Under the pieces of cloth were several herb mixtures and tinctures created to keep something fresh. Whoever had done this was clearly versed in alchemy and potioneering, which delighted their resident alchemist, Monsieur Zeller. His Lordship did notice that several of the preservatives applied did appear to be similar to what Mortalitasi did to mummify bodies, but only those that would keep the dead flesh from decaying rapidly. It appeared that the person was mostly concerned with the skin. If what Beverly told him about Will's opinion was true then skin would decay the fastest out of everything the killer was taking, so naturally she was taking lengths to keep it longer. "Strange that she would discard this one as well," he told the others. "Especially so far away. I imagine it was to throw off the scent, but still."

Alana was also right about the potential for a clue to be trapped in the herbs used and what was under the cloth. It was trapped and seeped into the individual pieces, the odor of a river and of rot. He had never smelled anything quite like it before, but it reminded him of swamps and death, a stench so strong it overpowered life itself. Hannibal did not like the idea of tracking this killer down like a courser, but it would be far more efficient than anything specific he did.

The nobleman took a quick glance around and made sure that nobody was paying him any attention. Most of them were occupied with whispering amongst themselves about something; it sounded like it involved rules and protocol. That was always something that you could get these Seekers on, if you talked to them long enough.

Hannibal always kept a small blade on him, needing it for protection against assassination attempts and for moments similar to these. It was never for this exact reason, of course, but simply for a bit of time when life called for dagger. This was one of those many, many moments. He took a small swathe of skin and nicked it off, right along the ragged edges where the killer was a bit more brutal with their own knives. Unless someone had seen him, they would have no reason to suspect. He was quick to hold a handkerchief to his mouth with the skin tucked inside, making sure it did not come in contact with his nose or mouth. He made his excuses, playing up the disturbed nobleman that could no longer bear to be in the room with the freshly dead.

Alana asked if he was alright, but Hannibal waved her off, claiming that he had been away from home for too long and apparently needed to see Nevarra again with the appropriate amount of laughter. She joined, but still looked concerned as he retreated from the room, prize in hand. It would be a simple matter to pocket it for later. He had a few ways of his own to preserve skin like this and it would help him find this killer.

Before he would go after her, he would first be paying a visit to Will. This would eventually give him the where, but Hannibal wanted to know the why before he decided to face her. Catching this killer would be a gift to WIll and a way for him to see the young man in action.

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It was strange. Hannibal Lecter was paying him a visit twice in one day. Of course, it was late afternoon now, as opposed to early in the morning, but the man's previous visits had been once maybe every two days. Will was lucky to have the little bit of light to help him with time passing, but he spent so much time in his head that sometimes it was difficult to keep track. Still, something must have happened for him to go this far.

The Comte stared at him through the bars, gawking as if he was on display in a menagerie somewhere. While he may have been playing more for Alana's sake, Will still needed to keep up the charade of poor, wounded Will. After all, the man appeared to have believed Will. During this visit, he was cross-legged on the floor, acutely aware of the Mabari clay figurine that tucked into his clothes. Without thought, the elf found himself rubbing his thumb along where it was hidden, a movement which Hannibal was watching. "You said that whatever friendship we may have had was lost the moment you stepped into a cell. My hope is that you are rescinding that statement."

Will shrugged slightly, trying to keep it from looking disrespectful. "I suppose. Whatever friendship we may have had prior was dodgy at best. You were my sponsor, I was obliged to keep you pleased so that your sponsorship wasn't taken away. Our previous relationship was unequal, unbalanced."

Hannibal nodded to him, acknowledging the truth of the words. "There was a power differential between us, one of sponsor and protege. I am well aware of it, but I had hoped we would be able to move past it. There was nothing that you could have done or could do that would have me take back my part of the deal. I enjoyed our check ins."

If this was going to work, Will needed to dangle the carrot; that meant allowing the monster only a few feet away a little something that he wanted. If the elf was reading it right, Hannibal wished to know him and wished for a friend. He needed to give to get. "Of course, any check ins now would no longer be colored by this as I am not beholden to you. These are simply conversations."

"You threatened me with a reckoning," Hannibal shot out, but didn't look upset when he made his declaration. In fact, his Lordship looked pleased, excited even.

"I did," Will replied. "No demon in my head then with exception to the ones that are naturally my own."

Hannibal was so careful not to move. Will observed the minute changes around the corners of his eyes, the clench of his hands. So stringent with his control of his body. It was something to be admired if it wasn't so Creators-damned irritating. His Lordship tilted his head to the side, bird-like, his beady eyes cataloging something WIll couldn't see. Honestly, if WIll hadn't been so severe in his own observation, he probably wouldn't have noticed the gesture. "You mentioned that you were searching for a way to incriminate, a shred of evidence of my guilt. Your change of heart leaves me to assume that you didn't find it."

Will's bittersweet smile was vague enough to erode his true meaning. He couldn't lie; no doubt his opponent would smell it on him. "There isn't much in myself that I recognize anymore."

"Whatever you remember, if you remember, will be a distortion of reality," was the reply that he got. Will's memories were all that he really had anymore. The small figurine was a gift, but it could be taken away and thus wasn't really in his possession. "Memories are often colored by the present, either this one or the moment from which they are taken. It won't be the truth."

Fair enough. Will's recovered memory was tinged with horror from the violation, but his only real perspective was the world around him. If someone asked him what else was going on in the room, there was no way he could tell them. Much of what he remembered from the months of illness were vague or so wrecked by his altered perspective that he still wasn't sure what actually happened and what didn't. "I'm realizing that," Will said, allowing his truth to bleed into his words. Even still, there was another thing that Will absolutely knew. There was no way he could misremember the ear being shoved down his throat.

"Seeker Katz came to see you," Hannibal said and had to physically hold his body back from startling. There was no way that he should be aware of that, unless his Lordship now had a spy on the inside.

"Yes, but how do you know that?" Will asked, genuinely worried about the prospect.

"She told me when she asked me to consult as well. They were very interested in my experience with the Mortalitasi." Hannibal could be lying, but the explanation was plausible nonetheless. "Did they tell you everything? Show you pictures?"

"Yes?" Will found himself saying. He wondered where the noble was going with his trail of thought and what that meant for this conversation. Will was also a little creeped out.

"Oh well. We wouldn't want you dwelling on anything morbid during this time of recovery." If WIll was a different person, he would have stuck out his tongue. "Especially Lady Bloom. She didn't seem to like the idea of it, especially when you have so much already on your mind."

Will narrowed his eyes, "**Seeker** Bloom will have to be disappointed, but something in me doubts that is the case. I will do it, regardless. It's the only thing that feels normal anymore."

Hannibal leaned forward oh so slowly. "The violence?" he asked, nearly breathless for the man. Compared to the noble's usual behavior, he was practically salivating.

Will disabused him of that notion. “No. It’s the structure and the accomplishment. The process of understanding the violence feels normal. I like knowing that I’m moving something forward and working through an actual problem, one with an end date.” A puzzle to solve that wasn’t going to take forever and it didn’t seem like another person was constantly removing and moving pieces was exactly what he needed.

“What did you see in them? What did you understand about this killer?”

Will paused, unsure if he should be honest here as well. It seemed innocent enough; there wasn’t any harm Hannibal would do by knowing. “Our killer’s missing pieces too. This whole endeavor is her attempt to put them back together.”

Comte Lecter seemed satisfied with the answer and left him to his own devices. All that really left him with was his own mind, repeating the encounter in his mind over and over. All he could think about was every moment shared before his incarceration and how he never saw what kind of person Hannibal was before. Regret was his only true companion, that and the demons that whispered his name.

It wasn’t long after Comte Hannibal Lecter left that Beverly arrived. He was tempted for a few minutes to outright ignore her; she had told Hannibal about her visit to him and compromised his progress with the man with another avenue left open for him to have access to Will. Unfortunately, the elf had no choice to continue telling Beverly more information, but he would have to work twice as hard to keep any leaks stopped up in the future. This one wasn’t a big deal at all, but it was the promise of shared conversations in the future that bothered him.

What Will needed to give Beverly was doubt and she would be a magnificent ally. Of all the people that could help Will actually prove his innocence and keep him from death or worse, it would be her. Jack was too hung up on his own problems and disbelief of Will. Jimmy and Brian hadn’t even visited him yet, so they were probably out. Alana was still new to this secret investigation business and was not experienced enough to ask; she was also a closer friend to Hannibal than she was to him and was more focused on the potential injustice of his treatment than his innocence.

Beverly was hung up on his guilt, but she visited him without prompting. She spoke with him. Apparently, she thought he was good enough inside to want to help with the cases (although that could always be based on different motivations). The Seeker of Truth was an accomplished rogue and investigator and wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty should the need arise. Above all, Beverly used to be his best friend; she had known him at his best and his worst. The only person that he had spoken with more intimately was Hannibal, and that wouldn’t do him any good with this particular situation. If he could get her to continue looking into the murders that he was brought here because of, then there was an increased chance that he would get out of there. They might not release him from the Circle, but the best option would be available to him. One day he might even be able to escape and be free.

Beverly came in with objects again; this time it appeared to be actual paper and not a skin book. “I know that you want to stop these murders as much as I do.”

He poked, “I can think of several reasons to stop multiple murders, but I’m going to need something in return.” Inside he begged for Beverly to not press further. Just take the bait and agree! If she actually left, the guilt would fester, but he would have to stick to his word.

She stared at him. “If you want me to allow you more amenities, I don’t know if I can give you that. I can always pull rank and talk to the Knight Vigilant, but if he says no, then there isn’t much that I can do.”

Shaking his head, WIll clarified, “No, I don’t need any more amenities. I have everything I need right here.” Beverly raised a disbelieving eyebrow at him, but he was on a roll. “No, I’m wondering if you can get me what I really want.”

“And what might that be?”

Will raised an eyebrow in return to meet hers. It was almost a contest to see who could go higher. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Try me.”

He rushed it out, worried that faltering might keep him from saying it. “I want you to ignore all of the evidence against me.”

“You’re right. I can’t get you that.” She started to leave.

“I’m not asking anything illegal. You don’t have to bring, disappear, or destroy anything. I’m only asking that you personally ignore it.”

Beverly stopped and turned back to look at him. “Say that I do ignore it. What then?”

Will stood and Beverly took a step back. That was disappointing. “All I want is for you to start over. They collected basically everything that I owned in that house. There’s nothing left there; it’s all in their evidence against me for the Knight Vigilant when he makes his verdict. Go through it again, disregarding what you consider presentational. If I’m guilty, you **will** find more evidence. That won’t be all that’s there. If I’m not, I think you’ll find that too.”

She didn’t say anything right away. Will could see that she was mulling it over, trying to decide if that would be what’s best. “Alright,” she decided. “I’ll keep looking.”

“Good. And I’ll help you.” Will slid his hands through the bars and she handed off the package to him, careful not to touch his hands. He flipped through the pages, seeing several very detailed drawings of Rolandre de Ombre’s body from several different angles. The rest was an extensive catalogue of all the evidence found on Madame de Ombre’s body including detailed descriptions of her wounds. It was not the same as being able to see it and feel the aura in person, but a few small spirits followed Beverly there. He looked at her and informed her, “This might take a minute.” Then he sat down on the cot, head leaning against the wall. Will closed his eyes and allowed himself to dream.

He found himself somewhere else, the indistinct dimensions of the place beyond his understanding. What he could see looked like the inside of a farmhouse. He moved to a rug

and displaced it, revealing a hatch in the floor. It looked like it should be a vegetable cellar of some sort. Inside was an array of bodies, all sleeping away.

It reminded him of a mage and a garden, so long ago.

They were held down by flimsy rope, more to keep them from rolling off their tables than actually strapping them down. Every body was mutilated in some form, exposed patches of skin bound with terry cloth sewn in which kept the healing and freshening herbs underneath. One of the bodies wasn't strapped down anymore. The rope was snapped and nothing was there.

Will stared at the table a moment longer before the world shifted and he found himself back at the Halamshiral barracks. The table that they usually placed bodies on was in front of him and there sat an approximate replica of the body of Rolandre de Ombre. The rope burns on her arms stood stark and red against dark skin; she had to bleed to get free. The papers were in his hand and he noticed that the victims were not nearly as well preserved. That could be accounted for by the extent of their stay in the river, but it didn't appear that they had evidence at all of any methods to preserve them. Their decay lined up with the disappearances and the environment they were found in.

"Why would I throw you away?" Memories of flimsy rope snapped filled is memory. She wasn't torn off the table. She tore herself off.

The killer was drugging them asleep. The other bodies didn't have any signs that they had defended themselves so they hadn't fought back.

Will opened his eyes and stared at Beverly. "She drugs them. The only way that she can still get vibrant flesh, hair, everything. She needs enough to keep herself fresh, but they need time to heal and grow certain things back. Teeth don't grow back either so our killer needs new ones. She tore herself free." Will couldn't help but think of himself and his own situation. How he longed to leave this all behind. "She ran."

"How did she end up in the water then?"

Will whispered, "The killer didn't put her there. I think that she'd have brought her back if she was caught. She seems to have a very specific victim set and they aren't exactly easy to obtain. The other bodies were dumped, either too much maintenance or the killer simply didn't know how to handle them yet. Rolandre de Ombre got away."

"From where?"

Will closed his eyes, trying to recall his dream. "I think I saw a farmhouse? It would be something like that at least. Somewhere private where she could work, but near the water so that the victim could have gotten to the river without being captured."

Beverly smiled at him. "Thank you," she said.

"You spoke with Hannibal Lecter. You asked him about his experience with the Mortalitasi," Will said and Beverly nodded. "What did he have to say about Madame de Ombre?"

The reply came easily. “He seemed to think that the killer dumped the body like the others.”

“No, no. That’s not what I asked. What did he say?” Will clarified.

She eyed him curiously, “That’s what he said.”

“Exactly,” Will told her. “That’s what he said. That’s not necessarily what he thinks.”

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When Beverly came back to the barracks, Alana wasn’t sure what to think. Her demeanor was off and she clearly was exhausted, from what the novice didn’t know. Her friend slunk past the bickering Brian and Jimmy, both occupied with some discussion about their bunk situation, and retreated further where Alana knew their rooms were located. Without a moment’s pause, Alana followed. Beverly didn’t need to be alone right now.

She entered the room and softly smiled at Beverly, who was laying face-down on her bunk. “Bev?” she asked, getting closer to the half-elf woman. “You okay?”

Beverly turned her head and frowned. “No. I don’t think I am.”

Alana sat down beside her and gently combed her friend’s hair. She needed someone to listen to her right now and Alana was more than willing to be a welcoming ear. “What’s wrong?”

Beverly curled around her, allowing the gentle massage that came. The expression on her face betrayed the headache that she must have been feeling. Alana was glad to soothe it for her. Only once she was comfortable did Beverly speak. “I just got back from seeing Will and I don’t know how I feel.” Alana said nothing, allowing her to speak without interruption. “I can tell that he wants to help and he wants to be seen as innocent, but you saw the evidence. How do I reconcile this? Will was my friend and it looks like he is a murderer.”

“You’re dealing with something that no one wants to,” Alana replied, trying to give Beverly comfort. “We all have lost a friend. Honestly? The evidence is not your emotions. It’s not your mind. People are not rational, no matter how hard we try sometimes. The conflict you feel is to be expected.” She took a deep breath and hoped that her words were reaching the other woman. “I still have trouble being near him for the same reason and for a different one. If we look at the evidence, Will killed someone. If we ignore it, Will is still changed. This experience is going to have a tangible effect on his mind and soul. He is not the same person we were friends with. I look at him and regret that I didn’t help him. All I can do is be there for him and for you.”

“How do you do that? How do you hold these conflicting thoughts and still care?”

Alana shrugged, “We’re complicated. Sometimes I want to just lie down and let the world wash over me instead of pushing on. It hurts more to care, but I do. No one should be alone in this tragedy.”

Beverly told her, “I feel like I am.”

“In a sense, we all are. I don’t feel what you do and you don’t feel what I do,” Alana replied. “What I can do is listen and talk. Support is what we need.”

Beverly sat up and turned to her. “You’re so good at that. Comforting. How are you feeling? These last couple of months have been a lot to take in.”

Alana looked away and just breathed for a moment. Beverly didn’t turn away or leave. Her own grieving process was just as complex. So much was bursting inside her; it couldn’t hurt to share it with someone. “I’ll admit that I’m not doing well. I left the Spire for a few minutes a couple of days ago and saw a beautiful necklace in a shop. It was just within my budget range, so I bought it. I found myself thinking, ‘Abigail would love this.’ It reminded me of her so much that when I got back I put it away. Living here, being with the Seekers, I feel like I’m leaving so much behind.” She laughed despite herself. “I remember having a conversation like this with her once. She felt guilty for living amongst nobility and finding a better life after her parents were dead, like it was a betrayal to them.”

Beverly crossed her legs. “And what did you say to her then?”

“I told her that her parents, or her mother at least, would not want her to reject a better life just because it came at the cost of her death. Most girls didn’t get the chance she was offered and that she shouldn’t squander it through grief.”

Gently, Beverly took Alana’s hands in hers. “Alana. Most people do not get the chance to become Seekers of Truth. Andraste’s tits, most of them don’t even realize that we exist. Abigail would not want you to reject a better life because you feel like living isn’t grieving her properly.” Alana looked away, the earnest look in Beverly’s eyes hurting. “Do not squander this because of her loss.”

Alana let out a single wet life, fighting back tears. “Maker that sounds awful. Why did I think that helped at the time?”

“It probably did, but-” Beverly grinned. “People are complicated.” She let go of Alana’s hands and sat back against the wall. “Where’s this necklace?”

Alana went over to her bunk and pulled it out. It was simple: silver and white gold interlocking plates that went around the neck with a small sapphire as the centerpiece. It had reminded Alana of Abigail’s eyes and the mask that she had given the young woman as a gift. “That’s beautiful!” Beverly breathed out and Alana made a split second decision.

“You should have it,” she said and passed it to Beverly. The other Seeker looked confused, but saw something in Alana’s eyes and made no further argument. She gently clasped it around her neck; Beverly looked gorgeous with it. Alana had no regrets.

“I love it,” Beverly told her. “Unfortunately it isn’t the type of thing I can wear to sleep. Can you help me get it off?”

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Night fell, a new Seeker taking the place of the old through the shift. Will could feel the tingling spreading through his limbs as his magic slipped away. By this point, he had an idea of when his mysterious guard was his warden. There were four Seekers assigned to him and they each worked in eight hour shifts. That way they were varied enough that through four days they each had a different shift watching over him and then a day 'off'. He used that term loosely as they were probably just doing something else. In a way, he was grateful for the one Seeker for neglecting to drain him. It was the only identifier of when he received the same guard over again other than their voices when they changed shifts, and it allowed him to roughly figure out their shifts. Of course, his timing of the shifts could potentially only apply to that particular Seeker, but even that was enough. Knowing when he would get his magic back could be extremely helpful.

Somehow.

Will settled in to attempt to rest. The visit from Beverly had set him slightly on edge. Knowing that Hannibal was being allowed near the Seekers of Truth in a more direct manner made his teeth ache and the phantom taste of bile settled on his tongue. Hopefully his work with Beverly would cause her to be a little wary of the noble (more than she was about nobles in general). Although, there was a high chance that wouldn't be the case. He didn't need her to hate Hannibal or go against him; there just needed to be the seed of doubt, something that allowed suspicious behavior to ping against her senses. It wouldn't be enough to do anything just yet, but those little pings added up. Then the eventual sum of them would bring Hannibal's plan crashing down. It was just a matter of time.

Inhale. Exhale.

Will closed his eyes. Another inhale and he held it allowing then tension to tighten his body. He exhaled and released it, feeling each limb as they unwound one by one. He did this again. Again. And again, until his eyes started to droop and he could feel his breaths slow. They started to come from deep inside his chest, the world slowed down around him. That was, until he heard the door open. The door opened? There was a Seeker guarding the outside of it! He opened his eyes and..

And…

He blinked and his brain felt foggy. What happened? In his hands, there was a scrap of paper. It was thick and the edges were jagged, like it had been torn from a book. It read:

Melava inan enansal
ir su aravel tu elvaral
u na emma abelas
in elgar sa vir mana
in tu setheneran din emma na

lath sulevin
lath araval ena
arla ven tu vir mahvir
melana 'nehn
enasal ir sa lethalin

He clutched the parchment in his hand so tightly it almost ripped. A piece of comfort, of home, was in his hands. It was a song from his people, ‘Suledin’, one about enduring and emerging from sorrow. It was sung in lament of their long lost lands, but Will had heard it often adapted for personal struggles as well. The scrap was small, tiny and unobtrusive enough to be hidden in clothing and pass a cursory search. The elven man folded it reverently and hid it under the mattress of the cot. It would be safe there for now.

He fell asleep wondering how it got there, but was too overwhelmed with joy to question it further.

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Hannibal had mulled over the information that Will had given him the day before and began working on his action plan. It wasn’t much, but it didn’t have to be. The only essential aspect was that he needed to send Will a message through it. There had to be something for the younger man to find; he already had an idea. Of course, while he was deciding exactly when he should go through with it, he received a message from a servant that the Lord Seeker wished to speak with him.

How exciting.

The woman was severe and by her face he could already tell that she was boorish. Whatever she had to say he was almost immediately disinterested in. That was, until he actually bothered to listen to her goal: to prevent him from visiting Will.

“You are formerly his sponsor, a victim of attempted murder by his hands, and someone that he accumed of commiting the crimes he is with us for. Furthermore, all non-Seekers except for the Knight Vigilant are barred entry into his room. There shouldn’t have been a way for you to get in his cell in the first place.”

“Pardon me, Madame-”

“Lord Seeker Prurnell,” she corrected through gritted teeth. Seething anger radiated from her, but Hannibal will admit that his address was not polite. Lord Seeker Prurnell had introduced herself earlier, but there was no need to be aggressive with the address.

“You take issue with my presence there?” he asked. Hannibal had his suspicions, but it seemed more appropriate to hear it from the horse’s mouth.

“Your relationship with the elf is already fraught with its problematic nature, including the rumors at court for which we have no evidence.” Prurnell eyed him, sizing up his reaction to her comment. He didn’t know why she bothered; the careful control that he exerted would hold without issue. “That, in addition to the fact that the Empress was flouting our authority in the matter and pulling strings to allow you in on her word, is my problem with it. The Chantry is a religious organization serving only our Most Holy, the Maker, and His Bride. We do not allow a political body to reign over us.”

So that’s what this was about. She thought his visits to Will hurt their position, seeing as it would be considered proof of his forgiveness or disbelief of Will’s guilt, and the Lord Seeker

took issue with the Chantry answering to the Empress of Orlais. Believe it or not, regardless of her status as one of the five highest ranking members of the Chantry, Prurnell still lived in Orlais. Her Radiance had authority over her whether the Lord Seeker liked it or not. “Political scheming has no place in the Chantry,” the Lord Seeker hissed.

Hannibal smiled, “And yet many clerics engage in the Grand Game. I believe you will find me back to visit Will again and I don’t believe I’m going to go away anytime soon.” He enjoyed her fuming as she left.

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Bella was watching him, one eyebrow raised, over breakfast. It was obvious that she was trying to make him speak through sheer force of will (which almost worked). Jack had been trained in some of the most vigorous interrogation techniques on the continent and still his wife managed to make him fold most times. Not always. The problem in this instance was that Jack wanted to talk to her, longed for someone to speak about his problems with. He just didn’t want to burden her.

The thought flitted through his mind and Jack almost smacked himself. He had once told her that she couldn’t burden him and that they were a team; why would he ignore his own advice now? A little voice said that his problems were trivial and hers weren’t, but his wife always said that he should just fess up and tell her before she found out her own way. It was often smarter to do so. He sighed. “Yes Bella?”

“You’re not going to speak to me about what’s going on?” she asked, smirking.

“I thought that was only once,” he replied and instantly regretted it. She looked like the cat that caught the canary.

“Jack. You and I both know that you’re an intelligent man, and unfortunately that spoils a lot of things. You have this tendency to fixate on something and not let it go until you’ve dragged it through the mud. As your partner in life and love, I’d thought you would have the sense to know me better. I’m going to push through this every step of the way with you.”

He grimaced and tried to stuff another egg in his mouth. Somehow, it ended up even drier than before. “Is that your professional opinion?”

“Jack. I can tell you're still troubled.”

He brandished his fork in her direction and it pushed a grin out of her. Jack always enjoyed making her happy and hoped he would get a chance to for years to come, that this wasting disease wouldn’t take her anytime soon. “Is that your professional opinion?”

“Quite.”

“Not as satisfying as I’d hoped. I’d like a refund please.” Bella laughed, throaty with her head falling back, and he fell in love all over again.

Post the laughter (after she calmed down)... as she was wiping the tears from her eyes, his love forged on, “Jack. We need to talk about this. You still care about Will and that’s hurting you.”

He continued eating, almost as if he hoped the food would mask his words behind them. “I care about who I thought he was.”

“And?” Bella asked, the question piercing like an arrow, the implications spreading like poison. “One quality in a person doesn’t necessarily rule out any other. They can exist side-by-side, the good and the terrible.”

A self-deprecating laugh. “Hate the sin, love the sinner?”

“I suppose.”

Jack looked out the window of their apartment, enjoying the light breeze that came from it being cracked open. Bits of warm sunlight stained the glass and spread the gentle heat where the light touched. Such beauty in summer when it could easily turn blistering. “I don’t know when I’ll see him again.”

“You know what? I’ve talked to people before, after they’ve found out about horrible things their families have done. They’re usually naive, young nobles whose parents sheltered them away from the worst parts of the Game. They experience a complex series of emotions: anxiety, shame, anger, guilt. They hear about how children see more than they’re supposed to and wonder how they missed all their family did. It reminds me a little of what you’re going through.”

He glared at her playfully, never more than that. “In case you didn’t notice, I am not naive, young, or a noble. My parents never sheltered me away from this kind of stuff; there was too much at stake for them to.” Jack knew what she was getting at, but wanted to remain obtuse for the moment. He needed anything to allow him his ignorance and fewer questions for a second longer. He deflated the longer that she stared at him.

“The parents do too, when they see a child that has gone too far.”

“They blame themselves for creating a monster,” supplied Jack. He was far more sympathetic to that problem.

“So do you,” Bella declared to him and popped a fruit into her mouth. “I do too, to an extent. I’m still not sure how to feel about Will and where he went, and I am reserving judgement until the future requires that I give it. If he was a murderer and knew it, I was around him as well, even if it was less than the rest of you. To me, I should have seen it more; I was at least a little impartial.

“How do you handle it?” he asked.

“I’m not sure how I’ll do it,” Bella replied. “I’ve thought about writing letters, seeing as I cannot go to where he is being held. Most of the people I’ve learned about have found the

most successful approach is staying in touch. It allows them to come to a realization about how they feel."

Jack raised an eyebrow, trying to convey his disbelief. It was palpable in the air around the both of them, so strong he was receiving feedback. "You want me to visit him."

Bella's eyes penetrated his armor, not allowing him respite in his own thoughts. "I think I want you to forgive him, so that you can forgive yourself."

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Will fell asleep in the middle of the day. Despite the comfort that the song had brought him, nightmares came and went through the night and left Will extremely drowsy. He was surprised that he made it as long as he did without dropping off. The inevitable came and his head drooped. Slowly after, he felt himself falling onto the bed. His hind-brain panicked, trying to force himself awake to avoid the demons that came with sleep, both figurative and literal. That's when he felt a hand caress his hair.

It was small, slightly calloused. It was extremely light and only brushed the way that Will often imagined a mother would. Tension fled from his body and he blinked bleary eyes up at his visitor. His vision was blurred, leaving him confused, but what little he did see appeared to be a boy, maybe late teens or early twenties. Blonde. Pale.

He tried to look past the fringe of hair to see the eyes but nothing came. "Who are you?" he asked and the figure startled.

"You… you know I'm real?"

Now it was Will's turn to startle. Know I'm real? "You seem real to me," he said and something wet fell on his face. The fingers continued brushing through his hair and he couldn't hear the reply.

When Will woke up, no one was there. His dreams were light, devoid of demons and spirits alike. Afterimages played in the back of his mind, but he couldn't translate them. Someone was here? Something? He had the strangest feeling that he had forgotten something important, something vital.

He rubbed a hand through his hair and found it neat. As neat as it could be when he had nothing he could use to clean or tidy it with. His scalp and shoulders felt extremely relaxed, unlike anything he had experienced since he was a child, perhaps younger. Will scratched idly at his head, listening to the chatter from the yard floating through the window.

Then he heard the words 'Red Tattler' and what followed dropped his mood immensely.

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A couple of servants were looking over something mysterious in the kitchen and responding with shock and awe. Abigail couldn't see it through the peephole, but she could hear what they were talking about: one of the servants involved apparently couldn't read.

The first one whispered, “So the Red Tattler apparently strikes again.”

“The Void is it this time?” Several more walk in and they all crowd around. If Abigail recalled correctly, the Red Tattler was Freddie Lounds’ pseudonym. The girl in the walls settled in, spying carefully on the bard’s audience.

“She wrote a pamphlet about a mage they have locked in the Spire.”

“The one that worked with the Templars?”

“ That’s the one.”

They were talking about Will! The passing interest she had in their conversation doubled; it would be great to have news about what was going. “Why should I care?” another asked and started to leave before the first interrupted, “He’s an elf.” That caught the rests’ attention, and they immediately began questioning what had happened and what circumstances would lead to an elven apostate working with the Templars. Abigail was reminded that not many people knew the Seekers of Truth actually existed and mostly just wrote them off as elite Templars.

“Apparently he was working with them to solve some murders. The pamphlet says that he was ‘consorting with demons’. It also says that he later killed a bunch of people and probably was possessed by one of them.” A pang struck her heart and

“Consorting with demons?”

“Is that true?”

Abigail could practically hear the first one shrug. “It’s the Tattler. Could be. Might not be.” They paused for a moment. “It says that the Tattler got close to one of his victims. An Abigay-eel Hobbs?”

“Lemme see that! It’s Abi-gale.”

“Ah. Well, apparently she was our current employer’s ward. The mage and she bonded after he killed her father and she saw him as a father figure. Tattler says that he took advantage of that until Abigail felt threatened by him.” The ward in question had to keep herself from swearing and Freddie. Instead, she clenched her hands in her clothes so tightly that the knuckles turned white.

“Typical story. Poor rich girl feels threatened by the elf.”

“I dunno. Magic can be pretty scary.”

“Piss off.”

“So get this. The mage told Red to not ‘piss off man who thought about killing people for a living.’ Tattler says that they believed him. Says they were terrified of him. This girl told her that she thought Will was going to eat her like the girl’s **father was going to.** That’s fucked up.”

“Maker’s balls. Some people.”

The servants dispersed shortly after, some saying that it was all the Tattler trying to pit more people against mages and elves, others saying you couldn’t ever know about people that did magic. Another group also claimed the entire story was based in fiction and that the ‘Red Tattler’ was just making up a background for the mage that was brought to the Spire in chains. Abigail wasn’t aware that Will had achieved that kind of notice. She pitied him.

And she felt guilty.

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The moment that Jack learned about the pamphlets, he went after Freddie. It had come to his attention not long after he arrived at the Spire to check on his team. A few of the younger Templar recruits were pouring over it and speculating on how accurate the information was about the White Spire’s latest addition. The Seeker hadn’t liked more than a few of the things he heard the little group suggesting. It was unbecoming of any group in authority to speak of abusing their charges in such a manner, prisoner or no. Murderer or no.

He put a prompt stop to it and then went on a warpath against the ginger bard.

He found her at a local tavern-and-inn. According to the bard herself, she was there because ‘Val Royeaux is where the action is’. He largely suspected it had to do with her vendetta against Will. Any way that she could make him look bad, she was going to take. She invited him to sit, so he ordered some tea from the bar and joined her. “When Will and Abigail disappeared, you and I spoke at length about Abigail Hobbs. You suspected her of complicity in her father’s crimes and guilty of the death of Nicholas Boyle.”

Lounds was relaxed in her high-back chair, lounging against it with her legs propped on the side. She wanted to look relaxed and in power before him, but Jack had been playing the Game long enough to recognize bullshit and fronting. “I remember our discussion.”

Jack snorted. “And yet you mentioned none of that in your little pamphlet?” Whomever her publisher was, Jack was going to have serious words. They probably needed to look into finding more reliable writers. Then again, Freddie was still popular despite her lackluster skills and blatant bending of facts.

The bard waved a hand dismissively, feigning confidence. “It wasn’t pertinent.” She sipped from the ale she was holding and that’s when the one of the servers brought up his tea, still hot. He took a few sips himself after a sniff test to watch for poison. One could never be too cautious. She moved in the chair while he drank, drawing into herself and moving her legs so they were firmly on the floor. When Jack looked up, her face was drawn with a simmering sternness underneath. Whatever she was going to say, she was dead serious. “Abigail Hobbs was a frightened young girl and she put her trust in Will.” Freddie spat out his name. “Then he killed her.”

Jack sat down the teacup on a nearby table, leaning forward attentively. “You make it sound like her death was premeditated.”

“Her murder.”

He stared at her, boring in and hoping for some clarification. “Did that conversation with Abigail Hobbs ever happen?”

She didn’t speak. Freddie didn’t have to. “Lounds. Stay away from this. You have no idea what’s really going on.” She started to speak, but Jack raised a hand to interrupt her. “You’re not going to have one either. Not because of me at least.” He stood and tossed her a couple of coppers that should cover the tea and then a little more. “I mean it. Leave it alone.”

He could feel her eyes on him as he walked out of the door.

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Beverly wasn’t supposed to hear this. She was positive that it wasn’t her business, but it concerned Will and that concerned her. The older Seeker was also immensely relieved that Alana wasn’t there; she could just imagine the younger Seeker stomping in to demand justice for her friend.

Out of all of the people in their little group, Beverly was their rogue for a reason. Sure, she could train Alana with a sword and shield, but those weapons weren’t her specialty. Her specialty came from knives in the dark and poisons that Brian made her. She thrived on getting behind her enemies and taking them by surprise. Beverly and Alana had been speaking in the mess, the former showing off her new necklace to the guys, when the group saw the High Seeker arrive, stomping like a herd of druffalo. Perhaps she shouldn’t judge as the man had been injured, but he played it up quite a bit. Ever curious, she had decided to stealthily follow the man, stalking him through the halls. That had landed her into a barren room with absolutely nothing in it except several storage cabinets. Fortunately, they were empty as well and she was able to slip inside without being noticed.

Chilton waited for a near unbearably long amount of time, checking outside of the door every so often. Honestly, Beverly was about to jump out and scare him under the guise of a prank, but the door opened and in walked none other than Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell. What an interesting development. Beverly did what she did best. She waited. Listened.

“Is this what they call back-channeling?” High Seeker Chilton asked, far too smug for a man clearly trying to manipulate her into giving him what he wants. He seemed to believe that he had already won.

“You saw him enough, High Seeker,” came Prurnell’s imperious reply. “I’d like to hear your opinions on our elf mage.” That was rather predictable if the two of them were meeting in secret.

Frederick looked around the room, trying to find somewhere to sit. He had been pacing enough that Beverly would wager that he had aggravated his wound from Gideon all those months ago. It’s what he got for not planning ahead. Eventually he gave up and told the Lord Seeker what she wanted to know. “Will has been a topic of fascination ever since he appeared on the map of the Templars. He managed to elude us for a great deal of time, but Senior Seeker Jack Crawford found him before anybody.” That was curious. As far as Beverly (and

Jack) knew, the Seekers had only been aware of him after Jack had found him. “Once found, Jack Crawford and his team protected WIll from scrutiny under the condition that they kept him in check, and Comte Lecter jealously kept the mage to himself. I believe that, had they not, those tragic deaths could have been prevented.”

Fat chance.

The Lord Seeker seemed quizzical, piecing out a puzzle only she could see. “Why are they so loyal to him? The evidence we have of his crimes and the man that the mage presents to the world are so very different.”

Frederick smirked, enjoying his place in the world as the informant and advisor in this instance. “Poor Will presents as a wounded bird, but he does not ask for help. Nothing makes people feel better than caring for someone who won’t care for themselves.”

“I’ve known Jack Crawford for several years and he’s no bleeding heart. He’s an accomplished Seeker for a reason.”

“Jack also found Will. He feels responsible for him. His emotions have compromised his view of the facts and he lacks clarity. That is Will’s gift.”

Kade looked thoughtful. “A conscious manipulation?”

He shrugged. “Without a doubt. Waking or sleeping, he is always working. Will is a Dreamer after all. They are known for their abilities to remain conscious in the Fade and powerful ones can shape others’ dreams.”

“You think that he’s that powerful?”

Both of them looked anxious and Beverly recalled that the most powerful Dreamers could do so much more. “I believe so,” Chilton said. He looked hesitant for a moment, like he didn’t dare continue. It didn’t last long. “We need to consider the possibility that he could become more dangerous the longer he’s left alone.”

“I’m right then. Will’s rightful place is with you where you can study him.”

Frederick grinned and Beverly thought she was going to be sick. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t become someone else’s nightmare.”

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Jack stood in a room with two titans looking down on him (metaphorically). He stood in front of three high-backed chairs, each person watching him and High Seeker Frederick Chilton very closely. There was the Lord Seeker and the Knight Vigilant, both of them looking as imperious and as righteous as ever. A Grand Cleric, one Jack didn’t recognize, sat between them, most likely there to mediate between the two factions. While the Seekers were over the Templars, people still considered them a Chantry-based organization. The Grand Cleric had no real say in the matter, but the threat of her presence meant that any wrongdoings would be reported to the Divine’s Right Hand. Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast was an imposing woman

and not known for patience with injustice. He always admired that about her. When he glanced at Chilton out of the corner of his eye, the man looked unbearably smug.

Jack knew that this visit wasn't for him to speak. It was only for him to observe and be observed.

Chilton prattled on, "With a mind like Will's, it would be better if he remained with the Seekers rather than the general population of mages. Even without magic, he is incredibly dangerous. I recommend that he is given distance from them to prevent him from affecting their dreams."

Jack cut in, despite the sharp look sent his way by the Lord Seeker. "Will has never demonstrated any ability beyond retaining consciousness while in Fade and a sensitivity to spirits. We have no proof that he could affect people in that manner."

"Or so he claims. Will could be able to work so subtly that even you wouldn't notice Seeker Crawford." Chilton turned back to his audience. "Will wears his mask so well that not even Seeker Crawford could look past it."

"And you did?" asked the Grand Cleric, seeming a little irritated. Jack could tell that she was from a foreign Chantry. Judging by her accent, the one from the Anderfels. There, breaking religious decorum was a crime with punishment handed down by the law; she would not tolerate any foolishness, but that left Jack fearing for Will.

Chilton mugged at him. "The mage had no personal relationship to manipulate me with and we never stayed in the same place when both of us were dreaming. I'd wager that distance is his only real weakness in the matter."

"And why should we allow young Seekers to be potentially exposed to his madness?" asked Knight Vigilant Trentwatch, gruff as ever. The man was known for being just and fair, but he still followed the bottom line when it came down to it. He had no real care for mages one way or another and was perfectly aware of the risks for Templars and operated regardless. Trentwatch was a man that was devoted to the Chantry and the Divine first, duty above all.

"Seekers are unable to be possessed," Chilton pointed out and that much was true. "That is the biggest danger gone. If Will had the ability to kill in his sleep or directly control a Seeker, then the rest of us would catch on quickly. My real concern is for the mages in the Spire. How long before he begins drawing demons to them?"

Fear-monger. Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course the ass would think to push this angle, idiot though he was. Nothing scared Templars more than the idea of a Circle full of abominations. Even the potential of it sometimes had them crying for the Rite of Annulment, because the best way to prevent mages from being possessed is to kill them all.

"Besides, Seekers are known for handling his brand of menacing."

Jack wanted to punch his face, superior or no.

“I am simply concerned with how hard you’re pushing,” the Knight Vigilant said, a suspicious look in his eyes. It relieved some of the pressure that Jack felt.

The Lord Seeker finally spoke, “You know about the violence of the murders. That kind of brutality is normally associated with demons, but we were assured by Senior Enchanter Wynne that he is affected no longer. My real concern is whether he was ever affected at all.”

Jack’s ears still rang after they all left. It shook him to his core, the words he had been dreading to suspect. As Jack left the room, he prayed that it wasn’t the case.

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It didn’t take Hannibal long to find their mysterious killer, which gave him a slight feeling of vindication that it was before the Seekers of Truth could. They had access to the same information as him and were trained to use all evidence available to come to conclusions, yet he found her first. He changed clothes before his journey, making sure that they were something easily disposable. After his work here, he would throw them in the nearby river, where they would float away. Anyone that found them would assume what they willed; it didn’t matter to him.

The location itself was a small shack about a mile away from the river. It was seated on the outskirts of Val Royeaux and looked like any other farmer’s shack, small rows of vegetables tucked behind the… house. Of course, there was also an extended-bed hand cart, which was normally used when one person needed to carry heavy loads. It was flat with low sides, the bottom one being the highest as the person using it would pull it behind them. He thought a wheelbarrow would be more efficient and less likely to make you stop and put a body back inside. It would probably only be able to fit one instead of the two or three this one could. Hannibal supposed that was the appeal.

It was so easy to lockpick his way into the house. Honestly, their friend could have used some better security. She wouldn’t be needing it for long though. The inside was a fairly simple home, the space that he assumed would be a washroom or bedroom (or both) obscured by a set of curtains. He didn’t bother looking over there, because his interest was drawn to the conspicuous rug in the middle of the floor with a single upturned corner. When he pulled it back, there was a door leading underground, definitely not locked. He locked his secret doors, so it was disappointing that she hadn’t.

He opened the hatch and peered down. The room was illuminated by torchlight and movement could be heard from within. Hannibal poked his head in slightly and marveled at the carnage he saw. Bodies were strapped down on the tables in rows, each unconscious with their body partially skinned, hair pulled out, etc. It was obvious to him that they were all once young women of some beauty, now their muscles exposed. There was a plain, but large, table against the wall. There was blood stained onto the treated wood and two kits pushed towards the back: a battle-medic’s kit, complete with saw and small knives, and a sewing kit with heavy duty needle and thread. That was when a young woman entered his line of sight. Her skin was peeling off of her body in large decayed sections. Bits of it were black with mold and disease. The eyes were sunken and glazed over, the sclera nearly grey. Parts of her body were bloated and the rest were shrunken in. The veins were prominent and heavily discolored, lending it a bluish purple-grey hue. All of the hair on her head was nearly gone,

leaving only stringy clumps clinging to the scalp. In a strange parody of putting herself together, her lips had a bright red matte.

Oh. She was a ghoul.

He leaned down, shifting his arms so that only one of them was needed to support his weight. Carefully, he knocked on the wooden part of the hatch to catch her attention. “Hello!”

She stopped, having been in the middle of carefully preserving a cut swatch of skin to place in a booklet. The ghoul turned and revealed that several of the pieces had been sewn on her arms and chest, presumably covering the worst of her corruption. She swerved around and looked up, staring with shocked grey eyes at him.

He smiled, pleased to take her so off-guard. “I love your work.”

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Will was prepared that night. Whoever kept intruding into his room and leaving him gifts needed to be identified. While the presents were appreciated as they had lifted his spirits and lightened his mood, the elf didn’t appreciate not being able to remember the encounters. It reminded him too much of the disaster he had been going through just prior to his incarceration. He was tired of feeling crazy and tired of having chunks of time missing. After the last ‘gift’, Will had decided to wait and watch for his mysterious visitor. It left him sleeping a lot during the day, but he didn’t get that many visitors and the door managed to wake him about any other time.

So, he relaxed his body so it would be extremely close to feigning sleep and watched the inside of his room vigilantly. His magic was gone, so maybe it wasn’t his dear Seeker friend (not that he knew who they were). Just as he was sure he was going to drift off, the door started making noise. Protesting metal filled the hall as the door to his cell was unlocked and opened. Inside, stepped a young man.

He was in maybe his early twenties and dressed in rags, only barely usable. The human young man had stringy blonde hair and a gaunt face; his skin was so pale it was nearly translucent. Only having moonlight available made seeing the color difficult, but through the fringe of his bangs, Will saw that he had light-colored eyes. His visitor wasn’t dressed like a Seeker, Templar, or even a mage. His clothes betrayed no affiliation except for poverty.

As soon as the door was shut behind his guest, Will popped up from the bed. “Who’re you? What are you doing here?”

The boy startled, clutching something in his hands. “You-you…” He seemed terrified. Maybe he was a servant and someone had been bribing him to give Will the little gifts. Were these from Hannibal as well? The thought made Will want to retch.

Instead he tried to moderate his tone of voice, especially when he heard the shifting of armor outside. “Please tell me why you’re here.” It was almost like his guard was unaware that anyone was in the room with him. Will had heard people say that the servants in Orlais were practically invisible, but he was sure that no one meant it literally.

In a hush, breathing the word more than speaking it, the young man asked, “You can see me?”

Actually. Invisible. Well either the collective of the Orlesian nobility had gone mad or it was just Will again. He was going to look forward to this. “I can. Is there a reason that I shouldn’t?”

The visitor grinned, “You can see me!” Then, he suddenly looked solemn. At the young man’s side was a wicked looking dagger, which prompted Will to push himself towards the wall. The young man approached, hesitating before the bars as if he wasn’t sure if he should take the next step. “They can only ever see me when they need my help.”

“I could always use some help,” Will replied carefully, examining the solemn expression on the other’s face. “What kind of help can you offer?”

The blonde tilted his head to the side, moonlight playing on his face to give it a glow. “I help to set them free.” He drew the knife. “They can only ever see me when they want to die.”

Will put his hands up in front of him as the young man slipped through the bars, almost as if he bent reality to phase through them while still appearing to move naturally. “No!”

He stopped. “I’m sorry? When they hurt, they call me. If they can see me, remember me, then they want me to free them. Don’t you want to be free?”

“I’m not interested in that kind of freedom.”

If anything, that only confused his visitor more. It also made him sheathe the dagger again, which comforted Will a whole lot. There were many people in the world that knew their way around a blade and too many of them had been pointed at him (physically or metaphorically) lately. The sooner his visitor was gone, the sooner the blade would be as well. Instead of getting in his face, the young man sat down on the stone, staring at him, fascinated. “You really don’t. I feel real around you without helping you.”

Feel real? A pang flashed inside of him as a poor girl’s face, still marred with the Tranquil brand even as tears flowed down her cheeks, sliced through his inner eye. An echo asked, “Am I alive?” in hissed words. Conversations about dreams and the vividness of this world compared to the dull one without any magic. Was it possible that his visitor was formerly a Tranquil? Something else? “You certainly appear real and alive to me,” Will tried.

The young man shook his head. “They called me the ‘Ghost of the Spire’. I’m not alive, but I only feel real when I’m helping.”

This was a dangerous gamble that Will was about to play, but if something called ‘the Ghost of the Spire’ stayed their hand to chat, maybe they could help elsewhere as well. “You can still help me-” the young man drew out his blade- “but perhaps it won’t require you to kill me.”

“Okay,” said the visitor and Will deflated.

He felt exhausted already and he hadn't even had to stay up that late. "Why don't we discuss it? Um..." The elf gestured for the young man, hoping to get a name.

"Cole," the young man supplied.

"Hi Cole. I'm Will," said the elf, smiling with relief.

"Hi Will."

Will moved away from the wall and sat on the cot complete cross-legged. Will patted the area next to him on the side of the bed, indicating for his guest to make himself at home. "Let's speak about how you can help me without killing and we can discuss anything further later."

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After all that had happened the last few months, Alana knew that she needed to see Hannibal again. Just two days ago, she had seen her old friend while meeting Will and the two of them could barely look at each other. She had never believed that so much could change inside of her that people she once thought of as her friends became total strangers; that went for Will and for Hannibal.

Alana couldn't do anything about Will's situation. At least, nothing that could solve it with a quick visit. In fact, every time that she visited, the novice had the distinct feeling that she was just making something worse. It was grating at her and she wasn't sure when she was going to want to see him again. It would probably need to happen after she caught ahold of her emotions and strangled them into submission. One step at a time, she told herself. All she had to do was put one foot in front of the other and soon she would be running. This first step was speaking with Hannibal. It didn't matter if she was just trying to get closure or if she was going to rekindle their friendship; they needed to have a conversation. When she extended the proposal to Hannibal, naturally he invited her for breakfast. It was a very prompt reply, which led her to believe that he had similar problems on his mind.

The actual meal was a very small affair. It was amusing to see him so rumpled looking, but Hannibal still appeared leagues more put together than most people Alana saw on a daily basis, even half-asleep. She was sure to keep her enjoyment of what constituted as 'bedraggled' for him at a minimum. Usually the noble pulled out all of the stops even for small meals, but the lack of them for this felt intimate. At first, Alana thought he was trying to continue their friendship (and was slightly worried that he had something more on his mind), but a quick conversation made it apparent.

Her old friend was very understanding when she explained her worries and confessed a few of his own. Hannibal was having trouble separating himself from what happened; three important people in his life left it all at once. Once Alana asked if he wanted her to come back, he explained that he didn't want to pull her from her duties and felt it was his obligation to see what was going on with Will through to the end. Alana described her own issues and they agreed. Neither of them felt as if they were able to properly devote time to one another while their lives continued as they did. They would remain old friends, but try and put their own ducks in a row before they tried to pursue friendship again.

Towards the end of the meal, a courier appeared on Hannibal's doorstep, asking for Novice Seeker Bloom. It was lucky that Alana had the foresight to tell Beverly where she was going, because the message was that another body had appeared. He wouldn't say more with a civilian around. She bid Hannibal adieu and rushed off to find out what horror she would view today.

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Abigail was eating her own breakfast, hovering in the walls just outside of the dining room where Alana and Hannibal were eating. She had encouraged Hannibal to give her a better way to see into this room, so he placed a large reflective surface that showed her the dining room and made it so guests only saw a mirror. Apparently he had an alchemist friend that had been working on creating a compound that sat between two panes. Abigail wasn't super interested in the details of the affair and had, must to her chagrin, stopped listening after a point.

Now, though, now she was rapt.

Alana hurriedly gave Hannibal her thanks as she took a last couple of bite of her food and bustled out following the messenger. Hannibal sat back and leisurely finished his own meal. Abigail watched him and the slow way he ate, the way his body was positioned betraying his excitement in the tense lines of his shoulders. Abigail had never noticed that he had done that before. Either she was just getting used to him and his mannerisms or she was getting better at observing the world with nothing else to do in these walls.

The girl in the walls watched as his Lordship took another bite of the food and stopped to savor the morsel, grin on his face with no reason to hide it. The self-satisfaction of the expression radiated off of him; one didn't have to see it to feel it.

Abigail could only think: Hannibal, what did you do?

Chapter End Notes

Melava inan enansal/ir su aravel tu elvaral/u na emma abelas/in elgar sa vir mana/in tu setheneran din emma na/lath sulevin/lath araval ena/arla ven tu vir mahvir/melana 'nehn/enasal ir sa lethalin

Time was once a blessing/but long journeys are made longer/when alone within./Take spirit from the long ago/but do not dwell in lands no longer yours./Be certain in need/and the path will emerge/to a home tomorrow/and time will again/be the joy it once was

This is not a direct translation, but rather a translation of meaning

Mala suledin nadas

Chapter Summary

> "Selfish, I suppose. Not wanting to spend my entire life screaming on the inside." - Dorian Pavus
>
> Alternatively: "Once again I’m falsely accused of whatever I’m accused of. Falsely." - Varric Tethras

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> Does anyone else find themselves using the same words over and over and desperately fight against it? Ugh. Anyway. Here you go! Please feel welcome to give me some constructive criticism or just tell me how you feel about it. If there's anything I put in here that I haven't explained in the codex, please let me know. This week's feels like a short one.
>
> Mala suledin nadas; Now you must endure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> In another time, back in another place, Hannibal smiled, his subject lying before him, flesh parting easily under his dressing knife. “You look beautiful you know.”
>
> The ghoul, once probably a beautiful young woman, gazed up at him with vacant eyes as he skinned off another piece of rotted flesh. Each delicate sliver sloughed away from the muscle and tissue underneath, it with a texture not dissimilar to wet paper. Her hair dangled, chunks ripped off from her initial frustration at being found. “Flatterer,” she hissed through what was left of her gritted teeth. They were so decayed that the effect was nearly lost. “You can be honest with me, you know.”
>
> He smiled. “It’s true. You may see this taint as ugliness, but it is a mark of your survival. You lived through something that killed entire villages, destroyed the dwarven empire, and took the life of your king. All of that death, and it only grazed you. You may think of your disease as a curse, but it shows your tenacity and will.”
>
> “It is a curse,” the ghoul gargled. “I was trapped in tunnels and ate the flesh of my blighted kin.”

The Comte stopped, thinking about a young boy trapped in an unusual snowstorm with men he did not know. Adventurers, they called themselves as they took respite at his home. Dead, he would call them later. This was not the time though, and he offered the only real words of comfort that he knew. “You did what you had to to survive. In this, you are not alone.”

Hannibal gestured around to the room they found themselves in. Bodies strapped to tables like butterflies pinned to boards. Children often plucked off the wings of those lovely creatures, enjoying the beauty they brought into their possession. This young woman envied the appearance of her peers, unhappy with her suffering and wanting to take something from these other women. They had not experienced a fraction of the pain that she had, and for that she wanted them to make herself anew. A better body would free her from her pain. “You have transformed them, showed the world what was underneath.” The ghoul may have rotted on the outside, but eventually these women would rot inside stripped of their pretty and petty exterior. Perhaps they already had. “In turn, you transformed yourself.”

“I’m not finished,” the ghoul whispered.

“I will finish it. With my work, you will be complete.”

She scoffed, “Are you the Maker in that you know how I should be?”

A quick caress to the exposed patches of scalp. “The Maker will see this and rejoice at the finished product.”

“There is no Maker. If He existed, why would He allow the Blights? Why would he have done this to me?”

There were no easy answers to doubt, just as there were none to faith. He would cultivate the freedom that faith allowed within her. “Why do children learn not to play in fire? They touch it and learn that it is hot, they feel the searing pain in their fingers. Without the Blights and without pain, we would never learn.” The decayed flesh on the arm was gone, so Hannibal pulled out the needle and thread to attach the fresh skin. He would keep swapping out the skin on the bodies before he left. It would cover both of their tracks. “The Blight taught you who you were.”

“A monster.”

“A survivor,” Hannibal corrected. “And now, everyone else will see it too. Including you.”

He watched as the life ebbed from her eyes, slight contentment appearing on her face. “All my life, I looked for who I was. A fresh faced noble or a farce? A stranger in a strange land. I wasn’t ready to die when I was trapped underground, but once I was free, I wasn’t ready to live.” She blinked and stared up at his face with glazed over eyes. “Everyone wants something. What was it that you wanted from me?”

He was pleased by the question and decided to answer her. “Only this.” A message to his rival and one day his equal. With her complete, her identity and place chosen, he would have a gift for Will.

Beneath him, lulled by his ministrations of needle pulling through muscle and skin, the ghoul faded away.

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The cart pulled up to the side of a small farm on the southeast side of Val Royeaux, the river leading to Lake Celestine flowing slightly in eyesight even though it was roughly a mile away. All of the groups filed out of their transportation and took in the sight of an idyllic space with guards running out of it looking sick. Collectively, they went inside.

It wasn't the initial living space that did anything. In fact, it was fairly normal looking. "How did they find this place?" asked Jack, and Alana watched as a nervous guard approached them.

"They, um…" He paused and glanced around at them, taking special care to memorize the insignia on their uniforms. "Bandits. They came because they thought the place would be easy pickings. Found it abandoned and thought it was the best day ever. We were in the area searching according to your parameters and went to stop them. The place seemed to fit your description so we investigated a little more and found this." He gestured towards the hatch, maintaining a careful distance from it. The sight of it bothered him, which was strange for Alana to think about. It must have been pretty gruesome down there. "There were a bunch of bodies down there, so we figured this must be it and let the appropriate people know."

"Will was right on the money," Beverly commented as she went forth and down the hatch. The rest of the squad dared the others to go first, but Jack pushed ahead. Alana shrugged and followed after, hearing the boys arguing about who had to go next.

"What was his insight on the matter?" Jack was inquiring when Alana reached the bottom. There was barely any light in the room except for the torches attached to the walls, put there by the people that found it, which Alana knew due to how new they appeared.

"Will thought that Rolandre de Ombre had escaped instead of being discarded." Alana supposed that made more sense. They found debris in Rolandre's wound and her body's condition was nothing like the other discards. Too well preserved; that kind of investment wouldn't lead someone to just throw a person away. Although, if they didn't think of their victims like people, they might not care. That was the trouble Alana had and what she knew Will brought to the table; he could extrapolate killer's thought patterns from the evidence left behind, giving insight where most couldn't.

Jack seemed to think similarly on the matter. "How did a human being get so bad?"

"Human being?" Beverly poked and Jack shook his head.

"You know what I mean. How could anybody do this?"

"I don't know," Alana offered. "I suppose the answer would be among them."

Alana cast a clinical eye about the room, taking in everything and trying to absorb what it might mean. It could very well be a blood ritual to an extent; the killer may not have been

satisfied with the lack of change to her body and tried to contact a demon with the force of her carnage. She tried to cast her mind, much as she thought Will did. It would take some concentration and some information , but...

“Jack this isn’t any kind of blood magic,” Jimmy informed them. “If that was what the killer intended before fleeing, she needed to do more research.”

They were all the same. Even the most rotted of them still bore a striking resemblance to the others. Alana thought that Jack might be seeing the same thing as her. “She saw too much of herself in them.” Over and over the delicate features repeated. They all had stitching patterns practiced on them and skin from other sewed into their bodies as well as the cloths; that was unexpected.

Alana told Jack, “As Will told Beverly, these people were a source of make up, a way to better herself. Fabric swatches to clothe herself in and wigs and dentures to appear whole.”

“Might she keep going?” Jack asked her, boring his eyes into her. Alana had the distinct feeling that she was being tested, so she took another cursory glance around to see if there was anything that she missed.

Not so much. So, she turned to him and told him her opinion, “Very likely.”

“You talked about the killer like she doesn’t see them as people,” he pointed out, which was true to an extent.

So, Alana nodded. “I suppose that’s one way to look at it. I think that she sees a perfect version of herself, according to her eyes, but in a way that makes them not people. They become a means to an end, a way for her to achieve her goal of perfection.”

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Jack took another bite of the food that Bella prepared as she listened to him patiently. “I considered Will a means to an end. I used him; he was a way for me to achieve by goal.”

Bella sat across from him at their table. It was only lunch, but he had opted to come home before he worked himself into the ground and suggested that the squad find the equivalent to do in the meantime. He would have to return afterwards to go over what evidence that he collected. Later in the evening, the Knight Vigilant Trentwatch requested his presence for another meeting, this one without the High Seeker. As he ate the food, Jack found himself blurting out his worries to his wife, who sat in a place away from judgement. Another reason that he loved her dearly and it was what made her a good ambassador. She took in as much information as she could before she made a call about anything.

Jack continued when she nodded thoughtfully to him. “I wanted to save lives, but it would be at the expense of his. I thought that despite anything I put him through, he would always fight his way back to himself… but I was wrong.”

“He could still be fighting.”

“Maybe he’s not,” Jack retorted, not particularly in the mood to be opening himself up to that line of thinking. His heart hurt as much as it did already.

“The point is,” Bella responded, “that you don’t know. Jack. It’s okay not to know.” Of course she would know exactly the kind of things that were bothering him. First, she understood that he was worried about Will being a monster. Now, she saw that he was struggling with the idea that he wasn’t when Jack met him and that he made him that way. His wife, his love, reached out a gentle hand and held onto his, stopping him from eating. “You can’t know everything. You can’t be certain of it all.”

“I do know this. Will descended into a dangerous and savage way of thinking and doing. Knowing that changed the way I see him.” Jack took his hand away and sat back in his chair, pulling into himself. The midday light streamed into their dining room, warming patches inside, but he couldn’t bear to sit in them. “It changed the way I see people.”

“Did it change the way you see me?” she asked and he should have known that she would.

“No.” It was a quick response. Perhaps too quick considering the look she flashed him, but quick did not mean dishonest. If there was one person untouched by anything that changed in his life, it would be Bella. “I suppose that the world feels darker or like it should be darker.”

“Are you worried that anyone else in your life could change so or that you will see us all differently?” Hands folded, posture leaning forward. She was trying to coax him into divulging more instead of parsing it out in chunks to her.

He laughed. “I’m feeling guilty, not paranoid.”

Bella pointed out, “You can’t take responsibility for someone else’s actions.”

“I’m not.” She raised an eyebrow. “Bella, I’m not, but, in retrospect, I did notice something was off and left it alone. That was action and something I can feel responsible for. If I feel guilt, it isn’t because of what I did to Will, or at least just because. It’s the guilt of watching so many lives fall apart because of my actions and inaction.”

“What exactly did you do and not do?”

He confessed to her, “I pushed him. When I was warned to stop, I did not and kept pushing.”

Her comfort was instantaneous. “You miscalculated. People do that. I do that.”

Jack drew out his response, emphasizing each word individually. It was vital for him to tell her exactly why this was so harmful. “I failed.”

“We all fail, Jack.”

He nodded. “Yes, we do. The problem is that I look at a person I thought was my friend and I see a killer. I suppose I’m still failing to reconcile those things.”

She smiled, but it was one of grief. “I didn’t expect one conversation to make those feelings go away. Emotions don’t work like that.” His love pulled back from the table, and began

working on her meal. He thought the conversation was over, but after a minute she spoke again, “Have you gone to see him again like I advised?” So, she had been waiting to speak, because she was mulling over asking him this.

“I haven’t. It’s only been one day.”

“You should.”

He sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“It never is.”

Returning to work was almost a relief. It wasn’t that Jack wanted to get away from his wife (kill him if that was ever the case), but the duty of the Seekers of Truth allowed him to sort out his own. It was soothing, in a way. He was able to work over the bodies and equivocate; it was surprising how death put things into perspective.

Beverly walked right up to him. “We’ve managed to identify almost all of the ten bodies. There’s one that nobody knows.” He followed her into the room where they were keeping them. Ten bodies, mutilated and torn apart then stitched back together in a parody of what they were before. The Templars were avoiding the area as if it was tainted and the Seekers kept sneaking peeks before quickly retreating. The bodies were being kept in the Spire rather than the local guard barracks due to the overwhelming opinion of the Templars present that magic had to be involved somehow.

If you get a hammer… Maker’s balls, they were quick to say, “Mages did it!” or “It had to be demons!” It was like they couldn’t imagine a regular person doing this because of the problems in their own head.

“This one,” Beverly pointed at the one that had larger chunks taken out of her and placed back. “We brought in the families of all the missing women. Some were sad to report that none of the bodies collected from the house matched their loved ones, but all of the other ten were claimed. Not her.”

Odd. “We got all of the families that didn’t match to come back in and double check.”

Beverly nodded. There was a reason she was his second.

Brian indicates the bigger gouges. “We thought at first that nobody was identifying her because of the face.”

The face did have large chunks removed from it as well as it was more marred in general. The replacement skin made it a patchwork of stitches and facial features. How much of it was from the others and what was from the person’s own face was impossible to tell. “I’m not sure why this one was picked; I found evidence of Blight.”

“Blight?” Jack asked, immediately stepping away.

Brian waved him off, but Jimmy piped in, “That was exactly my reaction. Brian, you need to maybe think before you speak sometimes.”

That caused Brian to roll his eyes. “It’s not dangerous, and I may have misspoken. It’s not the Blight, per say, but she is tainted. Probably a ghoul. It was hard to tell under all of the-” He gestured helpfully to the body in general. “Stuff.”

“He means the wounds,” Beverly added. “A lot of them appear to have been done while she was alive and then continued after her death.” She began pointing out the ragged bits of flesh to explain her meaning. “Although it was difficult to tell with the way that the Blight manifested in her. Lots of decay.”

Jack could only stare, seeing a victim treated more brutally than any of the others. “She sees a reflection of herself in them. Maybe this one wasn’t about what she wanted to take for herself, but what she wanted to take away. She saw a bit too much of herself and it was more than she could handle.”

Once the preliminary check-in was done, the Senior Seeker left his crew to their own devices. He had a meeting he was dreading to attend. Jack stood outside of the Knight Vigilant and Lord Seeker’s office in anticipation of speaking with the both of them and the third party brought in.. Lord Seeker Kade was outside of it with him, having decided to speak with him prior about what was about to transpire. The Knight Vigilant and the Grand Cleric had asked to speak with him, citing his lack of words on the matter during their previous conversation. If he had to guess, the Seeker would say that they were both suspicious of Frederick and Kade’s insistence on Will going with them. It was a little worrying to him as well, but what could he do?

Even now, standing in front of this door where three extremely important people in the Chantry (even if he outranked at least one of them) would be looking down on him and scrutinizing his every move, Jack could only reflect on Bella’s words to him that morning and her complete acceptance of him. He thought of their killer and how seeing herself caused her to lash out. Was he seeing his true self in this? For the first time in years, Jack wondered if this man was truly who he really was.

“Moment of truth,” declared the Lord Seeker, walking up to the door. He had been waiting on her to go in and face the Knight Vigilant and Grand Cleric.

He exhaled sharply through his nose. “If only I knew what the truth was.”

Prurnell shook her head, slightly exasperated. She was treating him like he was a child in need of guidance. “There’s nothing wrong with your instincts.” If only she knew what his instincts were telling him. They were a jumbled mess most of the time, but a small, yet significant, part of him was screaming that Will did nothing wrong and that locking him up was hurting an innocent man. The real problem was that absolutely nothing about the world lent any fact of proof to that small, yet significant part. The rest was perfectly willing to point to his own culpability in Will’s deeds.

He sighed. Better to be diplomatic than risk upsetting her. “My instincts are still piecing everything together.” Perhaps with more evidence and more time, he would arrive at a conclusion that he didn’t immediately doubt.

She waved him off. “Mine have, especially without prior involvement and no personal relationship with him.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at his superior. He had known her just long enough that she wouldn’t reprimand him or accuse him of insubordination, but she did raise a challenging brow in return. “Are you saying that I can’t be impartial?”

“I’m not saying that at all. What I’m saying is that you are not impartial.” While he saw the difference in her statement, it was still not one that he appreciated. “The problem is that when you go in there, you have to come to some sort of conclusion. Look at the evidence, Jack. Look at the facts and see the truth in front of you. Be decisive or you will make this worse.”

The door opened and they were all momentarily speechless as Chilton left the room, looking sheepish at their presence. Then Kade turned back to him. “I understand why this situation is difficult.”

“Oh?”

“Your duty is your life. It is a lot easier to be a man that let duty overrule personal relationships and missed his friend’s suffering than one that let personal relationships overrule duty and missed a killer standing right in front of him.” The Lord Seeker stepped back and surveyed his reaction. He said nothing. “Jack. If you can’t represent your own beliefs, then represent the Seekers. Will was our charge for so long without anyone catching onto him; he is ours to deal with, first and foremost.” Kade looked to the door where they both knew his audience was waiting. Gently, she touched his shoulder, the softest he’d ever seen her. “I can’t go in with you. They want you to speak without my influence.” She said the last word like the mere implication was an offense. “You’ll be fine.”

The first few minutes were irritating pleasantries. No one wanted to get down to business straight away, although Jack could tell that Grand Cleric Marion was starting to become irritated by it. They were in Orlais; she needed to do as Orlesians do. It was only after they had exchanged information about how each of their roles were doing and if Jack had anything else that he wished to bring to their attention that the Grand Cleric broke.

“We are here, naturally, to discuss the matter of Will. Your little elf mage that aided you with the cases you took.” She didn’t look pleased. It was no small secret that Jack’s squad tended to keep out of the business of monitoring Templars and instead patrolled areas for cases of illegal and malicious magic that they wouldn’t be qualified to handle. The fact that several of the cases turned out to not have magic involvement seemed to irritate the higher-ups and call his group useless on more than one occasion.

It’s not like Jack saw them doing anything about serial murderers. Local guards helped their townships as best they could, but that was only so much without the training and resources afforded to Chantry-affiliated organizations.

Even so, he bowed his head deferentially. This was neither the time nor place to start an argument, especially if he wanted to be taken seriously. Both of them eyed him before Knight Vigilant Trentwatch took over. “We do wish to hear from someone that was closer to the

matter and observed him first hand. Lord Seeker Prurnell made clear her own opinion on the matter as well as her opinion on you."

"Our concern," Marion emphasized, "is the fact that both of them are pushing hard for Will to be taken to the Bastion d'Argent. From what they've told us, he would be better off facing Tranquility."

"Or execution," Trentwatch supplied.

Neither of the alternatives that they granted sounded great to Jack. His conflict about Will took his opinions and rooted them in place. If it was up to him, Will would probably end up staying in the dungeons forever, never moving. That wasn't a good place for him to be either, but his internal compass was turning so fast that he wasn't able to figure out which direction to go.

The Grand Cleric leaned forward. "What did you see in him that you thought he could be of use, especially outside of a Circle?"

Jack shuffled. "He was intelligent and powerful, but quiet. I thought that if he was under our observation, then the situation would remain under control."

She guffawed bitterly. "Under control? Seeker Crawford, you have dead bodies, horrendous murders, now lying partially at your feet and you thought you could keep it under control?"

"We are not here to discuss the responsibility of Seeker Crawford," Trentwatch interrupted. "We need to know where Will should go next. That means trying to understand the situation to the best of our ability. The Lord and High Seekers have been arguing that the young man should go with them for observation. They seem to think that they could learn something from him or simply keep better control of him. If the young man is guilty and had knowledge of it, he should be executed. If he was possessed by a demon and is now free, we need to determine what kind of influence it may have had and go from there."

"And if he's innocent?"

They stared at him. Marion accused, "You provided the evidence proving his guilt, Seeker Crawford. Are you willing to say that he could be completely free of responsibility?"

"I think-" Jack paused. He gathered in his breath and looked back at the people judging him. They saw him as a tool and, in that moment, he saw himself in Will. Will, who was probably sitting in his meager cell right now wondering where he would go next. Will, whom Jack had not visited a second time, whether out of resentment or guilt, was facing awful odds wherever he went.

Uncertainty. His observations called back to his talk with Bella about being anxious only days before. That's what he feared and that's what was permeating through him. There were so many things in this world that simply didn't make sense and he latched onto what did. At this moment, Jack's opinion on the matter didn't make sense: he was torn in two. The part that was trained and raised among the Seekers, that lived and breathed the Chant of Light, was screaming at him to look at the evidence and the proof. He had supplied it, he knew it

was there. The part that fell in love with Bella and saw his squad as his children, the one that looked at a lost, formerly Dalish, apostate and said that he would be one of the good ones, was telling him that he could find certainty in faith.

Faith. Once he had put all of his certainty there.

“I think that there’s more to this situation than you think,” Jack said. “I don’t believe what I’ve heard the High Seeker say, that Will was just there to take advantage of the situation. Every time we spoke, he hated it, but he wanted to help in some way. I pushed him further and further until he was stretching apart, but he knew that he lost my protection if he stopped. I wasn’t exactly subtle about it.”

No one else spoke.

Warmth was flooding through him as he took a stand. This felt like certainty. Like righteousness. “Then I offered and he didn’t leave, he was saving lives. Every day he looked sicker and sicker, so many people warned me that I should slow down or pull him out, but I didn't. I had put in place advisers that would check me, but I ignored them. If Will actually committed these murders, he was probably so sick and so half in the Fade from my treatment, that he didn’t even know what was real and what wasn’t.”

Jack never gave them a chance to reply. Still high on the feeling of relief and unburdening in front of his superiors, he walked right out into the hall, free from the weight that had been dragging him.

Only then he saw Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell, who frowned at him before marching down to the other end of the Spire.

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Before Jack was captured by the evils of bureaucracy, he asked (without asking) Beverly to see Will and pick his brain over the information that they had. It wasn’t a hardship, she probably needed to see him anyway. These investigations usually went by much faster with fresh information and even faster when Will had access to it. Amusingly, as Beverly left she ran into Comte Hannibal Lecter. The man informed her about the Lord Seeker’s conversation and subsequent warning. Apparently he hadn’t seen Will yesterday, having been put off enough to allow it to affect him. Then, he inquired if Beverly would be willing to go with him to give him some legitimacy.

She was already going to see Will. The half-elf didn’t see why bringing Hannibal along would be an issue.

Of course, as soon as she stepped in to see Will, the Seeker immediately realized why it was a bad idea. Will’s face darkened subtly when Hannibal’s back was turned before he carefully schooled his face into something like weariness. Alana had told her that Will no longer was angry with Hannibal, but that was evidently not the case. The soul-sucking lack of energy was genuine, Beverly could tell, but he had to fight to dampen any anger and frustration towards the man. It tingled a part of her brain that wanted to press for more information, but

with the noble in the room with them, she didn't have the privacy required for that conversation.

Beverly raised an eyebrow at Will and held out her bundle. It contained detailed descriptions and drawings of the bodies as well as the room itself. She also had a piece of cloth taken from every single body. After his last run, Will mentioned that having something from the scene to get some residual energy off of helped him. Once, he said that location generated the landscape of the Fade, but he could walk a little if he had something associated with it (it's why he usually tried to sleep at the crime scene rather than just near the body). They decided that her bringing something from the crime scene might help, much like the book of skin the first time.

He grinned. "Now you're just taking advantage."

"Work for something, get something," she replied and his smile fell. His eyes flickered slightly between the two of them.

"What would Jack say?" he asked and she knew what he meant. She was about to try and speak on Jack's lack of awareness about their deal, but then Hannibal spoke.

"Seeker Crawford's excellent administrative instincts are not often tempered by mercy."

Will snorted, "Clearly." He settled down and waited for Beverly to hand over the information. Beverly glanced to the side, trying to keep her movements as quiet as possible. The man betrayed no awareness of her movements, but if Will was right that didn't mean anything.

What was she thinking? Will wasn't right about this. He couldn't be.

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Will flipped through the pages, trying to center himself. Beverly was not nearly as subtle as she thought she was, but there were far more obvious ways that she could have approached their deal with Hannibal in the room. Honestly, she didn't have to attempt to be subtle in the first place, but she was and for that he was grateful. After he felt that he had enough information that he could get (given the circumstances), Will closed his eyes.

He was back in the room, tables lining the perimeter like sentry trees of a forest, just shy of burial mounds. If he looked too hard at them, there were more and they stretched past, bending the walls with his thoughts. The further they went, the less the bodies made sense; one was Cassandra Boyle, another was Marissa Schurr, and on and on. He tore his eyes away, not willing to spot a Georgia or an Abigail.

So, he continued pacing the length of the immediate bodies. Past and past them he went until they began to look less familiar. Then, they started to look the same, and this was where Will needed to be.

He breathed out. He was fixed and whole as long as he wasn't seen. His insides needed to stay in so that the outside remained perfect. A testament to his accomplishments. The

patchwork of his skin thrummed and stitches and cuts popped up from underneath. Gently he ran his fingers along the seams and startled when a needle poked through, pricking his finger. Such damage done to oneself, but he wasn't that kind of person. He wanted to be better.

Someone else was here. Someone else saw the flesh beneath.

Carefully he made his way to the most mutilated of bodies, skin sewn together. The cloth was shoddily dressing the raw muscle and exposing the sins of the intruder. This one wasn't like the others, it stood out. It didn't belong among them, bodies so perfect until they were no longer of use. They hadn't known suffering until this, but this one was rotting. Tainted. Wrong.

Something shifted above him and a shadow flickered out all of the flames in the room. It creeped in, like it had a mind and will of its own, antlers of darkness caressing the air as they curled around him like a bird cage.

Perspective shifted and Will was on the table, skin numbing to pinpricks of pain that tingled from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. A hand stroked his face and he peeled suddenly closed eyes back open to stare into the face of Comte Hannibal Lecter, eyes black as Blight.

"You didn't come here looking for a killer," the monster breathed out. "Perhaps you came here to find yourself; this room harbors death."

Will hissed back, "A kill that you made."

The Dreamer's eyes opened and observed the ones that were fixated on him. One pair was curious, watching for what he would do next; the other was fascinated and burned into him every moment he looked away. Will was exceedingly aware of Hannibal Lecter's eyes on him. He held himself on the precipice of snarling when he shoved the papers back through to Beverly. "The Blighted one. The one that was most damaged. That's the killer."

"Wait, what?" she asked, trying to catch hold of her belongings and keep the book from fluttering to the floor. Hannibal helped to steady her until she could cast her moorings out again. "You mean that she was murdered too."

"Yes," was Will's succinct reply, bile growing in his throat. Missing pieces, he had said to Hannibal. It seemed that someone took that literally.

"What happened to her face?" she asked. "Did she do that to herself?"

"I doubt it," he retorted, trying to keep himself from staring at Hannibal. "I don't doubt that she hated her appearance, considering that she was Blighted, and that lends sense why she would go after all of the others. Whoever killed her took the pieces"

"Must have had an accomplice," Beverly concluded.

“Or a friend?” Hannibal chimed in, much to Will’s irritation. What kind of friend did the murderer think he would be? Not a good one, in Will’s opinion.

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Abigail was waiting in the area closest to the front entrance of the estate. Hannibal’s comings and goings had apparently been quite something and he had left her out of his plans, considering that he apparently did something that involved another murderer (if what she guessed was correct) and then spent the entire morning not being in a room alone until he disappeared. If Abigail had money to gamble, she would bet that his behavior had to do with not wanting to speak with her, which just made the whole situation frustrating. When he got back, she would be ready.

It took several hours while he was busy doing who knows what. Eventually, the estate’s doors opened and the man walked through, appearing no worse for wear. In fact, Comte Lecter seemed to be quite pleased with himself, which told her that his outing was a success and that no one was going to come for him. Yet. So, Abigail knocked on the wall to indicate that she wanted to speak with him. Honestly, she thought that he might ignore her, but instead Hannibal smiled and left to find the secret door into her part of the estate. Before too long, he was with her.

“Abigail!” he stretched out his arms, and she could barely stop herself before she was hugging him. She had been without human contact for too long so that even his gentle grip was comforting. “I’m pleased to see you are well.”

She stepped back. To business to business. This was important; the young woman couldn’t afford to get caught up in pleasantries or allow him to distract her from her course. “I’ve heard that you’ve been busy.”

“I have,” he replied. She waited for him to elaborate. “I have been trying to engage with Will. It’s important that he and I have a different kind of relationship before I get him released.”

“So you are planning to free him!”

He smiled. It was small and simple, but perhaps the most genuine he had ever given her. That was one good thing about the fact that she got to see his true face now; Hannibal was more free and less controlled with his expressions, being open just for her. “Of course I am planning to free him. It’s just a matter of when would be the right time.”

“Aren’t they going to-”

He waved her off. “If it ever comes to a point where we would lose Will, I will up my timetable and rescue him, ready or not.” That was a relief. Abigail already worried over much about her once father-figure. It would hurt to lose him to this, to something she had helped with. Hannibal patted her shoulder. “Do not worry. Soon he will be with us.” That was pleasing to know.

A door opened, and they both heard a servant running through the hall, looking for Hannibal. The noble turned back to her, grimacing with regret. “It seems I have to leave you. Don’t

worry, we will speak again." Then he walked out of the door. Instead of finding something else to do, Abigail decided to shadow her guardian. Unless he was studying, it was usually the more interesting task anyway.

The guest in question was Alana. That surprised her. Her former other guardian had been visiting more and more lately, but with that one exception of breakfast, they had primarily been on business. The second she walked in, Abigail knew that something was wrong. She seemed stern and even a bit angry. Dread pooled in the younger woman's stomach, and the small hope that this would be a pleasant visit dimmed.

"We have a problem," she told Hannibal, who was just as contemplative as Abigail felt. He probably sensed the same thing that she did; this had to do with Will.

"Speak Alana," he demanded, and Abigail pressed against the cracks, peering out at the Seeker that she used to know so well, her entire body begging for the news to just be shared already!

Alana glowered. "It's Jack." Abigail startled, confused why something that concerned Jack would be brought forward to Hannibal. "He's good as lost his position or, at least, his reputation as a Seeker."

Hannibal deduced, "Does this have something to do with the meeting that was scheduled with him and the Knight Vigilant and Grand Cleric?" This was news to Abigail. Why was Seeker Crawford meeting with them and why is it so important to the both of them?

Alana nodded. "While I'm glad for Will, Jack may have made a stupid move. He went against the Lord Seeker's wishes and spoke for Will, which is good. But now, the Lord Seeker probably has a vendetta."

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It was a simple matter for Jack to accept an invitation to Hannibal's home. The man was kind enough to invite him and Jack… Jack needed someone to talk to that wasn't his wife. It would be nice to speak with someone that was simultaneously very aware of his situation and the person that it concerned while also being a bit of a fresh perspective. Against his instincts, Jack found himself becoming something like a close acquaintance to Comte Hannibal Lecter. It was unusual for a friendship with a noble to end well for those less well-off, but Hannibal had yet to take advantage of their different stations.

Hannibal hadn't even tried to manipulate Jack into letting him back into the Spire. Granted, he still got in, but he tried to pull on no strings or push any buttons with Jack. The man had his respect.

The invitation in question was for an evening's meal and friendly nightcap before returning home. The dinner went pleasantly enough, both of them skirting around topics that would lend to a serious conversation. Those were to be saved over alcohol. The affair went by, Jack's mind occupied with the day's events and cataloging the things that he wished to say and what he didn't.

Post the meal, Hannibal led him to the study where he procured Antivan Brandy. They sat by the fire and sipped, Jack enjoying the sweet passion fruit flavor mixed with the sting of alcohol. Rivain may be in his blood, but Antiva was his heart. That was where he met his love, Bella, and where he truly grew into adulthood as a young Seeker of Truth. It was probably due to Antiva's unorthodox relationship with the Chantry that he had such a lax attitude towards his charges' piety and was more dutiful in his rooting out of corruption among the ranks. From what Jack knew about the man, Comte Lecter had lived in Antiva for a time as well. He was probably aware that this drink, although considered strong in Orlais, was considered to have low alcohol content in its home country. This wasn't meant to get him drunk.

Jack may have longed to speak, but it was Hannibal that began the conversation. "Alana told me what happened. I only know what she was aware of when she spoke with me, but I made a couple of inferences. You did a very brave and noble thing for WIll today."

Jack took a generous swig. It wasn't that he dreaded the conversation, but Jack had always taught himself to be a closed book. Opening up to someone about his problems that was not Bella was difficult. "Probably cost me what little reputation I had left among the Seekers. Prurnell is not going to let this go."

"You're drinking. Does it trouble you that much?"

He laughed, startled by the connection. It was a fair one, if inaccurate. "No, no. Honestly, I feel better than I have in weeks."

Hannibal smiled. "Clarity will do that." He took a drink himself, the lines in the glasses equal to each other. "Did you mean to jeopardize your position?"

Jack shrugged. At the time, he was more worried about the truth, his duty. The startling realization of his own emotions regarding Will helped so much. While he wasn't going to free him, per say (that would be incredibly irresponsible), he had reconciled the evidence with himself. It may have been Will's hands that did it or did not, but Jack believed that the young man wasn't at fault. That had made speaking out so much easier. "There is something appealing about walking away from it all. The noise, the violence." There was so much he would be able to do now. He would be able to be with Bella. Words he hadn't heard in so many years flowed through his ears, not since Rivain. "I'm reminded of something I used to hear the Qunari near my village say. Asit tal-eb. It is to be. It was their way of saying that a person can only be what they are. Granted, they used it to say that every person had a very specific purpose and going outside of that purpose caused suffering, but I think the literal translation has application here." Jack shrugged. "I can only be what I am. Now that I've found it again, the rest doesn't matter."

Hannibal tilted his head slightly. "Your defense of Will allowed you to be who you are."

Jack corrected him, "My lack of defense made me other. These instincts were taught 'into' to me, not just to me. When we are taught to wield a weapon, we are told to see it as an extension of ourselves to the point where we are inseparable. For too long I have relied on the instincts of others and the evidence right in front of me. I lost my way, the pieces of myself that brought me to the Seekers of Truth in the first place."

“Where will you go then?”

That gave Jack pause. He joined the Seekers because it was his calling, just as Bella became an ambassador. “Home.”

The Comte seemed amused and grieved at the same time. “Is home where your heart is?”

Thoughts of Bella. “It is.”

Then Hannibal leaned back. “So you step away and leave all of your burdens behind, find your true self amid the chaos.”

“Perhaps,” Jack replied. “I want to see this thing with Will through to the end. I owe him that. After that…” He shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe Bella and I could return to Antiva. We could travel the beauty of the country, the jewel of Antiva City. Step through the sands of the Rialto Bay and watch the waves crash against the shore.” It seemed romantic when he said it out loud. So morbidly romantic. “We could live there. She could die there.”

Hannibal leaned forward and placed a grounding hand on his shoulder. “She could die there, Jack, and where would that leave you? Wandering the streets of Antiva without purpose and without your heart? When all else is gone, you are still a Seeker of Truth, with or without the armor and insignia.”

A rueful smile spread across his face. “So you’re telling me to not just let myself be disavowed. To not retire.”

“We all sacrifice a little, when we must. Give and gain. As your friend, I’m telling you not to take what little you gain from this and have to sacrifice much more later.”

Sound dulled out. The organic hum of his body and the crackle of candles accompanied him to the door. Hannibal saw him out with as much dignity and decorum as either of them could stand to afford. Jack felt better and worse than when he arrived.

Upon returning to his work station the next day, Jack found a box. The box was small, only large enough for is ungauntleted hand to fit inside. He didn’t normally receive packages and those that came to him did **not** come to the Circle or barracks that he was working with at the time. Usually, they found their way to Bella or his current living space, depending on their urgency and purpose. In fact, if something was important enough that it needed to be given to him while he was at work, Jack encouraged the person to just give it directly to him or one of his team.

They knew better than to leave something on his desk unattended. Jack was paranoid by nature, and a single small package screamed bomb, grenade, or runestone enchanted to explode. He left it there and immediately went to get several other Seekers and Templars.

After several minutes spent determining whether the box was dangerous or not, it was deemed harmless overall. Finally, Jack opened the box.

It might have been physically harmless, but the contents plunged a dagger into his heart. Sitting there was an ear, pale with a couple of freckles tracing the outer curve, and a note. The hand was clearly unpracticed, but the words were legible enough.

To Jack Crawford.
With love.

Behind him, Jack heard several people begin to swear, a sentiment he agreed with wholeheartedly. Beverly began pushing people out of the room, trying to get them to leave. The hope in this kind of situation was that the less people saw, the less information could get to the person that managed to sneak into Jack's office and place the package there. The man in question thought there wasn't much more damage that could be done in this situation. Their friend was going to learn about this and quickly. Templars could be just as gossipy as old maids.

His mind was racing. The circumstances of Will's capture hadn't been made public. In fact, the most people had learned about the elven mage came from the contents of a Red Tattler pamphlet. This had to be someone familiar with the situation and with Jack. Or…

Or…

Jack wasn't ready to think that yet. Not out loud anyway. He had done so much already by admitting that Will hadn't been at fault for anything that had happened, despite how the evidence made it seem deliberate, but he wasn't out of the woods yet.

"Jack," Jimmy called, standing in the doorway of his office. "There isn't any magic on the ear."

Brian pushed Jimmy through the door and followed behind the other man. "The ear was also only cut off a few days ago, four at most."

"So our new friend has given us a timeline," Jimmy concluded.

"One thing's for sure, Will didn't do it," Beverly chimed in from beyond the entrance. She kept watching and warding off any potential audience. They already had enough shit to deal with.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Brian muttered and then yelled. Jimmy had punched him.

"Last time I checked, he was still in a cell," Jimmy replied, glaring at his companion. Brian started to retort, but Jimmy pulled ahead of him, "I already told you that there's no magic on it. Preservation glyphs leave traces on that kind of thing."

"Will did not do this," Jack claimed. "The timing is deliberate though. This person learned about the trial and dropped it right when a verdict was close to being reached."

“Such a grand gift,” Comte Lecter said later, when Jack ran into him. Seeker Jack Crawford had just told Will about what had happened with as little detail as possible. The entire visit, Will had only stared through him, past him even. He had the distinct impression that something was wrong and that Will didn’t want to speak to him. Maybe the younger man wasn’t ready to yet. Maker knows, Jack had only barely managed to stay there long enough to explain the situation before retreating. It shamed him to know that he wasn’t ready to speak with Will yet. He came to terms with his feelings, but the young man appeared to still be hurt.

Not that Jack blamed him. Jack wasn’t exactly kind during their last conversation.

“A gift?” Jack asked.

Hannibal replied, “Will does claim that someone else committed the crime he’s accused of.”

“Last time I checked, he thought that person was you,” Jack questioned.

“Maybe he was only half right,” Hannibal responded, and Jack raised an eyebrow in turn. The nobleman smiled enigmatically and left him, heading towards Will again. The Seeker was surprised that the man was still allowed in the building and then he wasn’t. Clearly, someone had informed Prurnell that Celene always got her way.

Jack shook his head, feeling the weight of six dead bodies piling on top of him, and left the room.

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Will sat huddled against his cot, ass on the floor. He was still mulling over what Hannibal had done only a couple of days ago and how he had made it a gift for him. The man had immediately come to Will to prod him, hoping for a reaction to his present. Now, he had received a new offering, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. It was strung up in his mind, his thoughts walking around the ear and trying to pull a hidden meaning from it. Naturally, it was during this that Comte Lecter walked in, the echoes of the doors shutting behind him.

A cat was bringing him dead birds and swatting at his feet for acknowledgement.

What was strange was that the look of Hannibal’s face wasn’t of triumph or even the same smugness that came with the noble’s previous visit. It was carefully blank, an emptiness that Will had been learning how to read. This kind of void brought out nothing though; it reminded him of a few of the Tranquil he had met, the ones that hadn’t bothered to learn how to fake emotional expressions. Whatever was on the man’s mind, he wanted to be sure that Will couldn’t read him or wasn’t sure how to feel about the situation. Perhaps he wasn’t the stray cat after all.

“It seems you have an admirer,” Hannibal spoke at long last. They had been silently observing each other for too long. “I ran into Jack on the way here and he informed me.”

Ah yes. Jack. He had come and told Will of the situation as well. Will hadn’t been able to gage what the man wanted and was trying to get out of the situation and still wasn’t sure how

to feel about it himself. As a result, he didn't speak. His former boss didn't seem frustrated, only sad, grieved. It was something he would need to deal with on his own. "Jack told you."

"Yes." What passed for a smile crossed Hannibal's face. It was barely an upturn of his lips. "I'm glad that he finally came to visit you, regardless of the circumstances, especially after the brave leap he took for you by pushing against the Lord and High Seekers." He must have seen the confusion on Will's face, but the upturned ticked a fraction higher. "A story for next time."

More likely Will would have to get Beverly to spill the information to him. It wasn't a terrible prospect, but the not-knowing what happened outside of the walls of his cell could be immensely maddening. There was no telling what knowledge about Jack's actions prior to visiting earlier may have done to their conversation. It was the not-knowing that ground him into the ground. The elf could barely stand it.

"How do you feel about your gift?"

Will cocked his head, trying to read what alien thoughts must have been behind those eyes. "I don't know if I would call an ear a gift."

Hannibal pointed out, "The boundaries of what is considered normal are getting narrower. Clearly, you had someone that thought sending an ear would be a helpful gesture."

"Oh?" he asked, taunting slightly. "You want to help me; you've said so yourself. How far would you go?"

His opponent's mouth twitched and there was a small flicker in the pupils of his eyes. "It hadn't occurred to me to send you an ear, but I am grateful that someone has." He paused, but Will could sense that there was more that he wished to say and yet didn't.

"Gratitude has a short half-life," Will snorted and allowed the idea to spread through his thoughts. Someone attempting to help him beyond the boundaries of what normal people would consider actual aid. That had already happened to Will once, and it seemed like this was Hannibal's way of saying that it wasn't him. He would have to speak with Cole later.

Hannibal spoke up from between breaths. "Doubt does as well. Our ideas about the world are not set in stone. We are exposed to new ideas, thoughts, and philosophies every day which allow our own adapt into their most potent form." He pointed to Will, the wisp of a start of a smile present. "I have new thoughts about who you are everyday, and you have new thoughts about me." Hannibal's new thoughts must be decidedly more pleasant than Will's if he was able to remain amiable during this conversation. Will nearly guffawed at what Hannibal said next. "There very well may be another killer."

"I want there to be," he spat out, the grit of bitterness clinging to the back of his teeth.

Hannibal twitched. "Some part of you still suspects me."

Will allowed the bile to show. Everything needed to be true, and everything was. "I'm not sure what anyone is capable of anymore." His closest confidants either put him in this cell or

left him. “Even myself.” He would have killed Hannibal if he could have. Still was going to try. “I only know that there’s no evidence against you.” He was too clean and meticulous.

“There never was,” the Comte gloated, although he managed to make it sound resigned.

“I can’t accuse you anymore. Accusing you made me look insane.” It was too true. The more he pointed fingers, the less people believed him. Anything that Will wanted to do to protect others had to be done as subtly as he could and most likely without significant aid. He had come too far from his broken mind and scattered thoughts to slip back under anyone’s thumb. “I’m not insane. Not anymore.”

“Not guilty either.” Didn’t he just know how to talk. Words slithering around the truth and wrapping it in coils. They squeezed together until the meaning popped out, but the true shape was unidentifiable. “Tell me about your admirer, Will.”

Now Will knew that Hannibal didn’t know who it was. If he had, there was no doubt that Hannibal would have done something already or, at the very least, he wouldn’t be asking Will about the person in this manner. “He knows me,” Will said, trying to convey something that wouldn’t give Hannibal too much. “At least he thinks he does.”

“Like I did?”

“I once thought you did,” was Will’s retort.

Hannibal closed in, not reaching the bars, but his entire body longing to. “The ear presents you with an opportunity. If someone else is responsible for your crimes, perhaps they now want to be seen.”

That threw him off. Will was very aware of who was actually responsible for the crimes and it wasn’t the man that killed the people Will was accused of. Why would Hannibal say something like that? “Why?” he asked, trying to get the statue to speak.

“He cares about you. He cares about what happens to you.”

Will held the monster’s gaze, wondering what exactly attracted these kinds of personalities to him and hoping that he would one day feel less like a butterfly pinned to a board under that stare.

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Shortly after Jack returned to the office, he was informed by Alana about their new find. She had managed to detect evidence of a code written in nearly invisible ink on the other side of the card and their resident alchemist took great pleasure in creating a concoction to reveal it. Brian was extremely cocky the entire time and went out of his way to make the reading of the whole message into a grand affair. It was an address.

The place was an abandoned warehouse by the docks. None of them felt very comfortable with where this had to be going. The five of them approached the building, Jack in the front, Jimmy and Beverly behind him, and Brian and Alana in the back. This just gave off the

impression of a place where bandits or slavers would hide out, which left him uneasy. The likelihood that the message had led them to an ambush went up immensely.

He swung open a door, two-hander at the ready. Jimmy prepared his longsword and shield, and the snick-snick of Beverly's dual daggers sounded off. Some rustling indicated that Brian had been preparing his bow. They were as prepared as they were going to be, so he rushed in.

Only to find that there was no one in the main room of the warehouse. All that was there was a foreign object in the center, covered by a dirty sheet. Jack swallowed down bile, this being too reminiscent of the time he found Miriam Lass's arm. Almost felt like another life, another person in his care that he failed.

The team spread out, creating a perimeter just in case there was a hidden person waiting to get the jump on them. It was once they established that there was actually no one in the building that Jack pulled off the sheet. There was a body.

It was in the early stages of decay, but no less grotesque for it. Jack had always found the early stages to be a bit more disquieting; the corpse looked less like a mound of flesh and more like a person. It's ear was ripped off, an arrow lying on the ground by the body with dried blood on the edge. The killer had thought to cut it off with that.

"Jack," Beverly whispered. "It's been fletched Dalish style."

The body itself was impaled on various types of antlers looted from all manner of beasts. The most recurring type was that of a halla, the sacred animal of the Dalish. Its face had been peeled back in a disturbing smile, nearly decapitated at the head, in the same fashion that Will had done. There was something missing though. If the killer wanted to emulate Will, then why was the body still mostly whole.

Jack's foot kicked something and he froze. A quick glance down confirmed the worst: a runestone of walking bomb.

"Go!" he shouted. "Get out!" Everyone took off and he sprinted towards the exit. As each one passed through the door, he counted them off. Only after they were gone did he make his way out as well, slamming the wooden door behind him. The sickening crunch and thud of flesh popping and hitting wooden surfaces exploded behind him, rocking the walls with the power of the rune. It was significantly more potent than the one that Will had allegedly used, but that was probably some of the point. They stopped, each glancing back at the destroyed building. Beverly, ever inquisitive, cautiously opened the door once more. Then, they were all back in.

The body was splattered across the walls, floor, and ceiling. There was nothing solid or usable left, all potential evidence of the killer destroyed.

Brian gave a single, mirthless laugh. "Looks like Will has a fan."

"Are you sure it's a fan?" Alana asked, ever hopefully. Jack could see it in her eyes, the wish that this was the actual killer and that Will was innocent after all.

“Positive,” Brian growled and stalked over to pick up the remains of the runestone.

“This was an interesting bit of theater. A nice show our killer put on,” Beverly sniped, as frustrated as him by the events.

“Will called Cassandra Boyle’s death ‘drama’,” Jack slowly said, tasting the words.

“We didn’t have any evidence before Will was apprehended and there hasn’t been any since.” Beverly looked to him, her conclusion wrapping around him.

“He ate a girl’s ear!” Brian yelled, fuming. “How much more evidence do you need?”

They ignored him, both positing what this meant for Will.

Knight Vigilant Trentwatch and Grand Cleric Marion were not pleased to hear from Jack and the Lord Seeker the following day. Honestly, the Lord Seeker had final say on what happened to Will, but in order to prevent the Divine (or rather the hands of the Divine) from stepping in, she needed to consult with the both of them. Technically, once WIll was brought to the Spire, he belonged to the Templars. The Grand Cleric was there to clear up any disputes between the two as a mediator, even if she had less power than all of them individually. The fact that the Lord Seeker was bothering meant that the situation was far more delicate than Jack anticipated.

So, he went straight to them, no pleasantries made. “The murder. What does that do for the case against Will Graham?”

Both of them glanced at each other before turning back to them. “We don’t know,” said Grand Cleric Marion. “I am arguing for Tranquility. If the elf is not guilty by his own hand or his own mind, he is volatile. There is a chance that the demon simply moved hosts, and that could mean a number of things. If he did not do it at all, aware or unaware, then there is still the matter of his possession.” She nodded and a pool of dread began to wash into Jack’s stomach. “He was possessed; we have evidence of it. It could easily happen again.”

“He’s too dangerous,” Trentwatch argued instead. “There is a chance that he influenced someone to do this with his dreams.” Here he gestured to Kade and that only made it worse. Jack recalled what the Lord Seeker had said and neither of them looked pleased at the prospect of Will being executed albeit for very different reasons. “I don’t know how long it might take to have the Rite of Tranquility prepared. Better to execute him before he can cause more deaths.”

“That’s it? You’re both going to assume that he either had something to do with this or is too dangerous regardless of his innocence.” He felt a hand on his shoulder trying to pull him back from confrontation. Jack didn’t have time for that; he needed to give Will the sentence he deserved. That meant if there was sufficient evidence to prove Will’s innocence (as he believed) then it needed to be heard.

“We are aware of your loyalties, Jack,” Kade shot at him. “It’s not to the Seekers.”

“It is,” he tried to emphasize. “We seek the truth and want what is just to come of it.”

“Your team brought in the evidence,” Kade replied.

Trentwatch and Marion watched them go back and forth, their faces inscrutable.

“And you know me as a person,” Jack pushed in her face. He saw Kade’s eyes widen. “You know how I think.” Logic and reason, taking things apart a piece at a time. “You know how important it is that I’m questioning what we found.”

Trentwatch broke it up. “Unfortunately, we don’t know you. Or fortunately, depending on your point of view. What that means is that we have to look at what we have and not what you’re questioning.” The Templars always had a hard time dealing with the Seekers’ natural urge to check every corner and edge of a box before opening. Solving a puzzle was no different than learning about a person, their motives, wishes, and lies.

“Why are you so insistent that he be punished harshly?” Jack asked the lot of them.

“We can’t take any risks,” Marion declared and looked at him sadly. She wasn’t resigned to the issue, nor did she regret her choice. Her gaze only showed pity, for him and his team that were so duped by the near abomination. If Jack was a different kind of man, he would probably have strangled her. “I understand that you are invested in his innocence, but this situation is too unstable for you to ignore the warnings.”

Trentwatch pitied him just as much. He hesitated for a moment before speaking, “I think I have come to a decision, if I may. In deference to your situation and adamancy that your friend might be innocent, I am throwing in my vote with the Grand Cleric. The elf, Will of Clan Lavellan, will be made Tranquil. This way he will not be unduly executed.”

Neither Seeker spoke, the Lord Seeker not fighting the ruling, but Jack could see that she wasn’t pleased with it. The Knight Vigilant continued, “You will be given two days to say your goodbyes to the man he is now.”

Jack felt like this was it. Thousands of what-ifs were threatening to split his skull. He didn’t say another word; he only walked out of the room.

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One of servants came to him with the greatest of surprises. Apparently, Baroness Bedelia du Maurier had come to his estate, unannounced and uninvited. Normally, Hannibal would harbor ill will to someone that would so misstep, but Bedelia was normally exceedingly polite and never usually initiated contact with him. The fact that she came to him of her own free will and would commit such a faux pas in the process left him intrigued enough to allow her entry.

The noblewoman was dressed well, her face hidden behind a mask that covered more of it than usual. It was a full mask, porcelain and plain, which told him more about her state of mind than any tick on her face. She did not want him to be able to read her. Masks did not hide everything, however, such as body language. Bedelia’s was tense and skittish. As soon as he greeted her, she aggressively prevented herself from brushing against him. Hannibal smirked, “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Thank you for allowing me entry,” she replied, stiff and each word said as monotone as possible. The Baroness always did this when she was holding tightly onto her reactions. She would stamp down on any inflection that would creep into her tone and change the emphasis in the pacing of her words. It threw most people off and unnerved others. The ones that were left could read between the pauses and the clipped syllables.

Hannibal moved to guide her into the parlor, but she held a hand up. “My apologies, but I won’t be staying long.” That was unlike her.

“I’m curious what would have you come here without prior warning.” They had not spoken for a fair bit of time. He had been preoccupied with the whole Will affair as of late and wasn’t ashamed to say that he hadn’t given her much thought.

She inhaled sharply to steady herself. “I thought you should be the first to know. I think I will be taking my leave soon.”

“May I ask why? You were doing so well by coming back here.” Years of seclusion were winning out over her living in the open apparently. Hannibal was by far one of the more reasonable players of the Game, despite being one of the more deadly ones as well. If she couldn’t handle his little threats, then she probably wasn’t prepared for the direct machinations of money and influence again.

Her speech was slow and measured, drawing out each word into its own sentence and each sentence into its own paragraph. “I do not believe that being among everyone is healthier for me. I am…” She paused. Bedelia seemed to be grasping at words flitting out of reach before she chose one, “...grateful. You have been an ally to me ever since the attack, but I don’t believe we can support each other the way either of us needs. Your relationship with Will of Clan Lavellan has clouded your judgement and is too close to home for my comfort.” She stepped around him, making sure that he did not stand between her and the door. Hannibal let her, knowing that she would not have time to escape if she bolted. “Furthermore, in light of recent actions, I have begun questioning some of your past ones, particularly the ones regarding my attack.”

“Questions,” Hannibal repeated. “Have you asked them to anyone else?”

Bedelia hastened to reply, “No. Nor am I going to. With all that happened, I would look just as guilty as you.” She took a step back. “Perhaps that’s what you intended,” she muttered. Another step.

“And how - exactly- would I look guilty? What would it be of?”

Hannibal stepped forward, crowding into her space. A clack echoed in the room as her heel landed behind her. She moved again. At this point, they were engaged in a careful dance, neither truly leading for the moment. “I can’t say,” she responded and swallowed down bile. “I have had to look, glimpse really, through the careful stitching of the person suit that you wear. I have concluded that you are dangerous.”

Person suit. Such a strange turn of phrase, if not accurate. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

She stared at him, her eyes peering through the tiny holes of the mask as if they were trying to dig their way through his outer layer into the softer, more vulnerable parts. “Please don’t come to my home again.” Bedelia turned on her heel and walked towards the door. “I’ll see myself out.”

Before she could go further, Hannibal called out, “I have been meeting with Will. He asked for my help.”

Her head whipped back around as she retreated her body inward. “Maybe you deserve each other,” she spat and marched out of his estate. No matter really. He would deal with her later, but first a meeting with Will. The news about the murder of a Templar Andrew Sykes had spread through the nobility, the circumstances practically shouted. He wanted to get Will’s read on it.

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Screams scrabbled in his head and Will tried to pretend that they weren’t his own thoughts. The whispers were louder than ever and any attempt to sleep allowed the demons to press into him, dip into his thoughts. Hushed voices promised escape, vengeance, his heart’s desire. His jailors just told him the verdict: Tranquility. Two more days of emotions and free thought and then he would lose it all forever. It was the perfect punishment for a crime he never committed, a fate worse than death. He had always had to fight to maintain a sense of self, to remain himself despite it all.

Now, they were going to take that away from him. Execution would have been kinder.

Noise came from the front of the room and he could just guess who might be arriving this time, wanting to pay their last respects to poor Will. Would it be Jack? Alana? Beverly? It was Hannibal. Comte Lecter walked in the room with the air of a man that was trying to extract information, delicately holding the skinning knife perched just above flesh.

“Will?” he greeted and the elf drew his head up from its downward hanging position. He hovered around in the middle of the ‘other room’, utterly still.

“You heard about the death of the Templar, Andrew Sykes.”

He snorted. “I did. I was also told about my sentencing as a result of it.”

“Your sentencing?” Hannibal asked. He truly didn’t seem to know. That was a surprise to Will, who thought that Hannibal was carefully observing the proceedings for any sort of change or charge. “What do you mean?”

“I’m to be made Tranquil,” Will spoke aloud. It was a flat pronouncement. The disaster waited on the tip of his tongue. “I have two short days left.”

The Comte stiffened. “Your admirer didn’t help?”

Will shook his head with a humorless grin. “The death of Monsieur Sykes by my **admirer** only pushed them further. They seem to think I still had something to do with it or if I didn’t

then I need to be dealt with anyway. They're planning to drug me into dreamless sleep and prevent me from reaching the Fade. Evidently, there are drugs that can do it; the only reason they haven't so far is that they're precious and eventually become useless. Apparently they don't want me trying anything desperate."

Hannibal stared at him, memorizing his face. Will supposed that his Lordship was free; if they found any evidence that Will hadn't done it, their fear would keep them silent. The Chantry would go on and on about how it was a different killer copying him, anything to prevent the mages from having another injustice to fuel their fire. Will had heard a few mutters of some of the Circles getting worse. If it was discovered that a nobleman had framed a mage for his crimes and the alternative was never considered, it would only make things worse.

"They are not convinced."

"His blunt replication and timing makes it clear that it isn't the same killer." Will rolled his head to flash a grimace at Hannibal. "But you knew that already. Still, they are finding a million and one excuses why I am involved somehow."

Hannibal rolled his shoulders, they must've hurt with how stiff he was holding himself. It couldn't be good for his posture, something man seemed to hold great pride in. It showed every time he walked into the room. "I would've liked to have been wrong."

"You ignored some possibilities, refusing to see how some people would react when they are faced with a mage like me." His grin became wry, amused at the people who were so obsessed with the treat of magic that they forgot some of the world's perils were mundane. "I'm dangerous."

Hannibal shuffled. Will didn't think that he had ever seen the man shuffle before. "I came here to speak with you. I was hoping to dispel your doubts about me once and for all, but it seems moot."

"Certainly," Will said. "Any doubts I have will be gone in a couple of days anyway. Dispeling them beforehand is entirely for your benefit."

"I wanted you to believe in the best of me, just as I believe in the best of you."

Will sobbed out a chuckle, overwhelmed with the pressing reminder of just how little he had left. "A little late for that," he responded thickly.

"Jack is ready to believe."

Will countered, "Was. What Jack is ready to do doesn't matter. You seem to think that the killer should have resolved something for me, but it sped up the timer. Soon, there won't be anything of me left to feel bitter, so you can take your worries about my doubts and my hopes for freedom and shove it."

"I-." Hannibal looked away. "I'll admit that my visit was selfishly motivated. I don't want you to be here."

“I don’t want to be here either,” Will spat. He turned on his cot to face the wall, away from the man he once called a confidant. The elf couldn’t stand to see his once-friend’s face.

Behind him, there was the echoing noise of a couple of steps. It walked away from him, hesitating at the door, before the sharp sound of knuckles rapping against metal snared his thoughts. The door screeched open and close, still sounding while the feet snapping against the floor traveled down the hall.

Will politely asked the Seeker at the door if they would refuse any more visitors for the day. The person seemed surprised and a little uncomfortable with being addressed. They never even said a word after that, only returned to their post.

No one else was allowed into his cell.

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Hannibal left Will with a sinking feeling. In all of his plans, he had never accounted for his timetable being so short or that Tranquility would ever be an actual option. He had anticipated a fight; Jack had been well on his way to preventing that outcome. This new killer wasn’t a part of his plans and had unintentionally worsened Will’s situation. On one hand, Hannibal can admire their attempt to stir the pot and cause something to happen. Clearly the person had thought that the death would give Will some freedom. Intention, action, and consequence are called separate things for a reason.

By the time he got home, the Comte had started forming a plan. It wasn’t fully-fledged, but it needed to be done that night. As he understood it, the potential victim was leaving back for the Anderfels tomorrow, apparently not having the stomach to witness the destruction of the young man she had put on the chopping block. Bedelia would have to wait.

Several raps came from one of the walls. This was as a good a time as any, so he joined Abigail in the secret part of the house. If all went well, they would be moving again soon. It couldn’t be right after Will would leave, but it would have to follow rather quickly. The young brunette greeted him happily, squeezing his torso in a vice. His slow isolation of her had been working well; at this point, she actually looked forward to his appearances and no longer watched him as if he would bite at her any second. He could tell that she still didn’t always believe him and certainly didn’t rely on him as much as he’d like, but progress was progress.

“Did you get any news?” she asked, breathlessly, but there must have been a look on his face, something that tipped her off. “What’s wrong?”

“I just learned that Will is to undergo the Rite of Tranquility in two days time.”

She stared blankly. He was reminded that Abigail had been educated by a poor family and then by a small Chantry after that before she was in his hands. Her awareness of the Rite and what it actually meant was probably low. Will probably didn’t say a word to her about it; Tranquility and the Tranquil were unpleasant topics. People didn’t like the idea that dealing with mages meant taking away who they were (or they liked the thought too much). “It is a ritual where his mind is branded with lyrium and his connection to the Fade is severed. After

it is done, Will is going to lose his magic, his dreams, his emotions, his personality, and, eventually his memories. It will start with his connections to other people being fuzzy and alien without any attachment behind them and then grow from there."

"He won't- he won't remember me?"

Hannibal brushed her hair behind her ruined ear. "Eventually he won't remember anyone."

"Are you going to let this happen?" Abigail begged desperately. "Please don't!"

"You needn't worry. I won't."

It was time to get on his way if he wanted his excursion to be successful. Will's very soul depended on it.

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"Tranquility," Brian slurred out, tipping back for another long drink of the Prophet's Laurel Gin that Beverly had sprung for when they heard the news. "Fuuuuuuuuuck."

"I thought you thought that Will was a killer and fuck him and all that," Jimmy replied, making grabby hands at Brian. Eventually, the alchemist relinquished the bottle.

"I mean, yeah, but Tranquility," he sighed the last word out. "No one deserves Tranquility. I know he was never a Seeker, but why can't they just send him to the Sea of Ashes."

"It's because he's not a Seeker," Beverly explained and Alana scoffed.

"Oh so now a person needs to be special to have certain forms of execution," she snarled and went back to her tea. Beverly had shoved it into her hands once she learned how much the other woman had been drinking. It wasn't healthy and not worth the pain tomorrow would bring.

Every single one of them, even Brian, had tried to visit Will that day, if only to say goodbye. They had all been turned away by the Seeker guarding the cell without explanation. Once that happened, each of them requested a night off which had been generously granted by Jack. They decided to spend that night getting as wasted as possible before they would each try to see Will again the next day.

They bundled up together, trying to grieve in their own ways. If they thought Will had been doomed before, it was certain now. People always said that certainty could grant purpose, insight, and direction. Andraste's ass, Beverly had been one of the people that frequently said that. Well, certainty could go suck it somewhere else. Knowing that in a couple of days, her friend (once best friend) would be gone brought Beverly low. She didn't know what she was going to do next.

The next morning Beverly found herself sighing, tired as she wandered from the dormitory for the Seekers staying in the White Spire. The discussion last night weighed heavy on her and was killing her from the inside. Later that day, she would probably need to see Will at the very least to say goodbye. She thought about watching him as he would be after, seeing him

walk the halls of the Spire, the sunburst brand stark on his forehead. The thought made bile rise in her throat and she shook with the force of it. If the Seeker could do anything about it, she would probably request to be allowed to leave. The very idea that any time that she saw him again, he would have no emotions towards her, if he even remembered. She knew that sometimes the process caused them to forget immediately from the trauma of the Rite. No matter when it happened, though, Will would forget. His lack of ability to think on the life before Tranquility would mean that eventually he would lose all association with her.

Yes. Beverly didn't think that she could stand to see him anymore after that.

The first thing that she would need to do was ask Jack. She meandered over to his office, dragging her feet so that it would take longer. If anything, her insides rebelled against bringing it up. That would make it real.

Of course, her arrival did reveal something. It wasn't the one she was expecting.

Suspended from the ceiling in the parody of prayer was Grand Cleric Marion. Her arms were chained in supplication and eyes burned out of their sockets, head tilted towards the sky. Folded into her hands was one of the mock swords of Hessarian, stabbing herself in the heart.

Immediately, the Seeker ran to report this to Jack.

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Another day, another scene. Granted, this was the first one that Jack had encountered within the White Spire. If violence occured in the Spire, it was usually a rogue mage and easily spotted. All that required was a couple of good sword swings and dispeling magic for as long as it took to take down an abomination. This was a bird of a different feather. He sighed while the team danced around him, taking samples and sketching out the scene before they took the body down. Removing the body at this point would only leave them less to examine later. A couple of younger Templars had to be stopped. It had caused an argument which Jack had to break up, leaving him with a massive headache.

Speaking of a massive headache, while managing the people working, Jack spotted the Lord Seeker. By the look on her face, he could tell that she had just arrived on the scene and was extremely surprised by what she was seeing. That made the two of them.

"Pardon," he said to his squad and the few that had volunteered to help them. They parted before him as he walked right up to Prurnell. "The killer exerted careful control of the environment and left very little evidence behind."

Her face twisted in disgust, leaving ugly lines running through it. "This mess was supposed to be the end of it." She sighed and looked up at the dangling body. "She was the one that was pushing for your mage to be made Tranquil." Will wasn't his mage, but Jack didn't bother to correct her. "Will was drugged into unconsciousness rather than sleep; he wouldn't have been able to enter the Fade and influence someone to do this." Neither of them said that a Dreamer could have feasibly convinced someone of this course of action far beforehand. The Lord Seeker wanted Will in the Bastion too much and Jack didn't want Will to become Tranquil. "Without her influence, High Seeker Chilton and I can better sway the Knight

Vigilant to take our side." That was… more of a relief than it wasn't. The fact that he could find any joy in a body dangling from the ceiling made Jack feel a little sick, but he had a lifetime of experience pushing down emotions such as that. When one works with death for so long, their ideas about life and its value tend to skew. "It's frustrating that we've found a jester that enjoys playing these kinds of games."

"Leaving us to be the true fools," Jack replied, and the Lord Seeker glowered at him sharply.

"Who's 'we'? You made your allegiance very clear when we spoke with the Knight Vigilant and the Grand Cleric."

Jack gestured up to the former Grand Cleric Marion of the Anderfels. "I think we've got bigger problems than 'allegiances." He paced slightly away from the body and from prying ears and eyes. "I'm not going to fight you on your decision. I don't know if I agree with it, but it's better than execution or Tranquility." Even if Will wasn't aware when he did any of that, it didn't make him any less dangerous in the eyes of the people around him. Insisting on it was only going to get him killed.

Kade, meanwhile, was trying to stare him down, assessing the honesty of his statement. When she was satisfied, she spoke again. "I'm sure that after things have settled down here, you can find the time to see him in the Bastion." She grimaced. "I know you want to see the best of him, but you have to force yourself away from this. Exposure only makes people like him more dangerous." People like Will. "Things were going wrong before Marion's body was found all because you want to believe in him."

Jack wasn't going to back down and she knew that. "You must be a very good friend to want to risk everything for him." He once saw the young man as family and definitely believed him to be under Jack's care and responsibility. Obligation was a dangerous thing, no matter where it came from. His returned conviction only doubled it. Prurnell placed a tentative, gauntleted hand on Jack's shoulder. "Everyone leaves someone behind at one point or another. Cut Will loose or there's a good chance that the someone left behind, today or tomorrow, is going to be you."

The prospect made him so tired, but Jack knew it would be true. The only question was who was going to be doing the leaving. At least for now, it wouldn't be him.

He quickly returned back to the office after the scene. The rest of the crew were going to look into the mess in front of it, but he needed to make sure that none of his papers or information was disturbed. While the room was locked, it ultimately meant nothing. An accomplished lockpicker could easily gain access to it and then lock it on their way back out. It wouldn't be easy, but Jack hadn't gotten to where he was in life by underestimating others.

After a few minutes of searching, he affirmed that nothing was noticeably taken or tampered with. He didn't rule anything out; Jack wasn't built that way. Some of his worry was eased. Only some. His thoughts were interrupted by three quick raps on the door and Jack poked his head out to see a younger Templar recruit. The young man looked to be maybe sixteen and was intimidated by Jack. The Seeker couldn't find a reason for him not to be and therefore did not care. "Yes?" He tried not to sound irritated.

“You have a visitor, Monsieur,” the young Templar slurred out and moved aside. The movement revealed a blonde woman in a styled Orlesian gown meant to allow for freedom of movement. Her mask was made of delicate interwoven chains which were knotted into her hair, pulled away from her face. It was flirting with the edge of being barefaced while still following the rules of the Grand Game, subtly challenging any other players and meant to show her prowess. You had to respect someone with the attitude to pull that kind of thing off. Jack waved her in and the Templar scurried off.

As soon as she entered the room, the confidence of his guest dropped and her eyes darted around. Jack poured a drink for her, a West Hill Brandy that he was extremely fond of. “Baroness du Maurier,” he greeted.

“Seeker Crawford,” she breezed, observing every corner of the room as if it held a lion bent on devouring her. “It is a pleasure.”

“What can I help you with, your Ladyship?” he inquired.

“I am leaving, but I thought I might pay you one more visit. We talked much on Comte Lecter during our last conversation and I wished to finish it properly.” Finish it properly. He wondered what sort of thing she intended to ‘finish’ their conversation with. Nevertheless, she continued, “I apologize for doing this so abruptly, but I felt it prudent to ask you not to contact me again.”

“You’re asking the Seekers of Truth not to contact you?” he asked, incredulous. The Seeker didn’t understand what the noblewoman expected. If the Seekers of Truth needed to contact someone, they did it. Such was the nature of their Order. They never did anything lightly and rarely didn’t have a reason for their actions.

“I cannot offer you any more insight than I already have.” What little she had offered had been immensely valuable and he told her as such. She only laughed. Her knowledge of Comte Hannibal Lecter actually might be more useful now, since Jack knew the man was still seeing Will, despite everything that had happened. Jack didn’t understand the man and nothing irked him more than that. “I feel that it would be irresponsible for me to continue seeing Hannibal Lecter. In fact, I feel it more prudent for me to leave Val Royeaux.”

“Irresponsible for who?” he interrogated and she smirked.

“For me. You know how the Grand Game works, Seeker Crawford. We must be able to understand our allies and trust them just as much as our enemies. I am not in a secure place emotionally and haven’t been since I came back to this city, possibly since prior in Halamshiral. I am recusing myself from the situation.” She tilted her head to the side and spoke demurely, “I hope you understand.”

From the little that he had spoken with Baroness du Maurier, she did not seem to be a weak woman or even a cowardly one. She had also only just returned to the city and was retreating after only a couple of weeks back at most. “I’m not sure that I do,” he replied gruffly.

She gestured vaguely. “This whole situation reminds me far too much of my own experience with a protege. Both he and I were traumatized by ours and being around him and with the

news buzzing through the city… It brings back too many memories."

Jack thought to the news he had received from Beverly and the Lord Seeker that the Comte had continued to seek out and speak with Will, even going so far as to speak with the Empress to get access to the mage (much to Lord Seeker Prurnell's frustration). "He doesn't strike me as particularly traumatized." He eyed her, waiting for the reaction to his next words. "Frankly, until this conversation neither had you."

"I have been-" She twirled an errant lock of hair with a finger. "I have been thinking. Far too much. It has me lingering on the circumstances of my attack and reminiscing more than I expected. It has come to my attention that I may still have unresolved issues with the matter that need to be dealt with."

"Have you talked with one another?" Jack asked. "It's come to **my** attention that speaking with someone can be an immensely helpful way to cope. Furthermore, if it's Comte Lecter's situation that has brought it to your attention, maybe speaking together on the matter may help."

Baroness du Maurier tittered, smothering the laughter under her hand. It was extraordinarily obvious and he wasn't amused by her actions. Once she had gathered herself, she spoke, "I am trying my best not to work out my issues with Comte Lecter." The blonde noblewoman took a deep breath and left him to his thoughts. "Goodbye, Seeker Crawford."

He bid her farewell, but just before she exited the room, Bedelia turned back to him. "Obviously I cannot actually control what you, the Templars, or the Seekers of Truth do, but I ask you to heed my wishes as I expect the same of Hannibal. You may attempt to contact me, but I would prefer that you don't."

She left before he could ask her to clarify.

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The Lord Seeker was the one that informed him of his new fate. He would not be made Tranquil or executed. Instead, Will was to be given to Chilton's tender care. How delightful. Prurnell was insufferably smug about the issue, pointing out that they believed him a danger to others and that for the safety of the mages and Templars, he would be brought back to the Bastion d'Argent. As far as Will knew, their justification for bringing him there was flimsy at best, and he knew that they simply wanted to study him so they could understand how Dreamers worked. The Knight Vigilant probably washed his hands of the affair after the Grand Cleric of the Anderfels was murdered.

He sighed and then silently raged. Someone had murdered her for him. Will had never even met the woman and she was the one pushing for his Tranquility, but she didn't deserve to die for it. Much as he hated the Chantry as an institution, Will never approved of someone killing people due to inconvenience or personal gain. Justice or self-defense were the only reasons killing was justified and this was neither.

A tiny voice reminded him that he had liked killing Hobbs. He had thought about killing Stammets. The mage, Laurence, was easy to dispatch. He stamped it down, reminding it that

Hobbs and Stammets were murderers. Laurence was as well and had attacked them at the demon's bidding. He hadn't slaughtered innocents out of hand and his enjoyment had come from seeing justice done.

Movement came from the other side of the room, then in his immediate vicinity. Will blinked and Cole sat beside him. Anger rose up to his throat, the knife on the young man's belt a bitter reminder of what Cole thought helping was. Will had thougth they had come to some form of agreement, but that could be wrong.

"Did you kill them?"

The young man startled. "What? No! What are you talking about?"

"The young Templar and the Grand Cleric. Did. You. Kill. Them?"

Cole shook his head emphatically back and forth. "No. No. No. No! I didn't! I didn't! They didn't call for me; I wouldn't have felt real."

"You're the one that thinks death is release. You said that you were helping when you killed all of those mages."

"I was helping!" Cole yelled back. The Seeker shifted outside of the door and both of them didn't speak for a moment. "I was."

"You were hurting them."

"They stopped hurting after I helped them."

That froze him over. "Stopping a person from ever hurting again is **not** helping them."

Cole sobbed, and Will realized that Cole was being honest about not killing the Templar and the Grand Cleric and felt the young man's grief. The boy's distress was genuine. He sat back on the cot and stared for a moment, their argument becoming nothing. He inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm the last of his anger down. He could sense that Cole wasn't going to stop; he genuinely thought what he was doing was right, and the rush of feeling real around those that he killed would keep him doing it. As long as the victims that he took were willing, there was nothing that Will would be able to do about this invisible boy that people always seemed to forget.

Footsteps came from down the hall, approaching them. Will looked to Cole.

Cole was quick to leave, and Will was grateful for it. If the young man wasn't the one that killed the Templar and the Grand Cleric, then it was someone else. Will's reading of Hannibal and instincts about the man claimed that he wasn't responsible for, at least, the death of the Templar. The jury was still out regarding the Grand Cleric. That meant there was a murderer on the loose that had a sort of attachment to him (besides the one he already had). That was concerning. Will was also getting a little tired of it. It was difficult to appreciate someone caring about you when they killed to show their love.

The steps from the hall echoed in his cell, getting closer and closer. He listened to them, waiting for them to walk by and grow fainter again. It sounded like someone was walking around in heels while their accompaniment stomped in heavy steel boots. His magic was still his, which told him which Seeker was in the hall.

They stopped in front of the door. Once upon a time, Alana and Abigail wore shoes with heels. Now, no one that Will knew wore them. His visitor, his audience, was unfamiliar to him. It could be the Empress of course, but Will doubted that.

The woman that entered was petite and blonde. Her hair was coiffed with small silver chains holding it in place that became the mask on her face. They kept her together. Her gown was split and slight movements revealed that she wore some kind of pants underneath; perhaps they were leggings or trousers? She seemed to hesitate at the sight of him; Will knew that he looked wild. His hair was shaggy and long, the long nights partially exposed to the elements, the same clothes everyday, and then being left in this hole with no amenities made him seem feral to some people. The Templars probably milked that to heighten the sense of danger he gave off to people. Will thought, at first, that she was nervous to see him. So far, the Seekers had managed to keep most gawkers out, but those that did sneak by were Seekers or Templars themselves. Nothing to be done there.

Then he saw her face and knew that wasn't the case. This was a woman that wielded influence like a knife and took pleasure in watching others underestimate her. Public power and perception weren't her concern. While many enjoyed the Game because of the reward, she (like Hannibal) participated because the act itself **was** the reward. This audience was a test and a push.

"Hello," she said demurely. With all of her power, she clearly had a purpose in being there. There was no way she would actually visit simply to stare. There was also no way that someone didn't know of her visit and he couldn't fathom what the noblewoman might get out of meeting with him. "I am Baroness Bedelia du Maurier." He didn't speak. The title and name meant nothing to him. "I was a pupil of Lady Mantillon alongside Comte Hannibal Lecter. We entered society together."

He went cold. This woman knew Hannibal. There was a good chance that she was either here on his behalf or was on his side. Will was no longer interested in whatever diatribe she was going to spit out at him.

She tilted her head at him, something he had seen Hannibal almost pull so many times. It was the barest faction of a movement, only visible when one was looking for it. "I've heard so much about you, I almost feel as if I know you."

Heard about him. From Hannibal? He could guffaw. Whatever the man had to say about him was likely false or through the lens his desires created. "You don't know me," he replied, voice flat and dry as a desert.

"No, I don't," she said and there was a touch of sympathy in her tone. Or was it pity? Will could almost swear that Bedelia du Maurier actually felt for him, as irritating as her presence felt. He could almost taste her presumptions. "I don't think I could any more if I tried, but I do understand you more than I thought I would." She sighed audibly and it was such a

display of emotion and vulnerability that he almost believed it to be an act. “I apologize for the circumstance of our meeting. I only found out about your sentencing on my way down here.”

“And the original purpose of your visit?”

“I wanted to see you, face to face, to meet you. I am planning to withdraw and one of the last mysteries I ever dealt with was the identity of the elf Will that captivated Hannibal so.”

“What are you withdrawing from?” he questioned.

Without hesitation, she answered, “Social ties.”

Then he snorted. A noble trying to leave the Game and the court behind was nearly impossible. Ift followed you wherever you went, meaning to play the game or not. If there was one thing that noble’s knew, it was how to be a better self-important, pompous ass. Hannibal was certainly good at it. They thrived on the knowledge of other people and what others thought of them. “Are you not a consequence of social ties? Your sense of self linked with how others perceive and interact with you.”

“That is certainly true in your case.” Ouch, he wanted to say. Will did not. “It may be a small comfort, but I am convinced that Hannibal has done what he truly believes is best for you.”

Her statements just kept getting better and better. “That’s not even a small comfort; it’s none at all.”

“Then transform this experience. I know you are capable of doing so.” She contemplated her next actions carefully, before she took a cautious step forward. “The traumatized are unpredictable because we know we can survive.”

‘We?”

“You can survive this happening to you.”

His voice echoed his thoughts. “Happening **to** me.”

Bedelia du Maurier stepped right up to the bars of his cell and he joined her, drawn by this person that was identifying with him. Trauma did that to people. She understood where he was and how he got there; Will knew that now. A voice echoed from the door, apparently having been paying attention to some of the conversation. “Madame, step away from the bars.” None of the Seeker-guards had ever cared before, but this one was making strides, protesting and working to open the door. Will cast a spell without hesitation, freezing the lock on the door. She watched him curiously; it wouldn’t stop his keeper for long.

They were chest to chest at this point, a mimicry of intimacy. Only the bars separated him and she raised her head, he leaning down to hear her. Whispered words in his ear, slow and sensuous in their meaning, giving validation to his struggle and hope for the morrow.

“I believe you.”

The door snapped open, ice shards cracking and nearly hitting the two of them. Will was struck dumb, too shocked to say anything as the Seeker hauled Baroness Bedelia du Maurier out of the room, their eyes staring at each other. New understanding blossomed between them and he could only mouth the words she spoke in repeat.

Someone else believed him. Wholly. Completely. Someone that could do something.

He wasn't alone.

Will dropped down onto his cot, listening as the man dragged du Maurier down the hall, even though she was no longer struggling against him. His hands, his feet, his entire body began to tremble. Relief cascaded through his limbs, warmth quenching the searing cold he had felt for so long.

V^-V-^V

Hannibal expected that Bedelia's suites would be under heavier guard. Their last conversation made it clear that she was afraid of him and what he would do. To be fair, he hadn't done anything to combat that, encouraged it even. The ease with which he picked the door and slid through the barriers only stoked his fires. He needed a greater challenge and hopefully the woman herself would be.

Comte Hannibal Lecter and Baroness Bedelia du Maurier were the last public proteges of Lady Mantillon, the dreaded Dowager. Hannibal was positive that she had a few more after, including Celene, but the two of them were brought into the Court together, taught together, and watched the Orlesians with discerning eyes. They were the foreign nobility that had pushed their way into the Game. To most people, they were little more than amusing players with low seats of power, but the ones higher-up on the food chain knew just how dangerous they could be. Now, it was time for Hannibal to get rid of the spare. He did care about Bedelia in the way adults thought about childhood acquaintances, but there was too much potential for her to cause him problems later, even if they were both about to leave Val Royeaux. Maybe especially because of it.

These were problems that could be remedied now with the kiss of a blade. He didn't care about her enough to spare her that.

The inside of the suite made it apparent why the outside was so sparsely guarded: there was nothing there. Large sheets were draped over the furniture to keep out dust and prevent stains or degeneration, and the small personal effects that inevitably littered a living space were gone. The noble, the killer, silently glided from room to room, searching for a clue or the missing woman herself.

It was in the last place that he looked. Wasn't it always?

A small bottle of fragrance sat on a small table by one of the lounges in the Baroness's library. He recognized the subtle sweetness of Andraste's Grace, brightening up the room with its scent. The bottle itself was crystal, thick feeling. He knew that dropping it would shatter it, no matter how hefty it appeared. Something as rare as this was too valuable to leave here. Bedelia was going to make good on her threat for as long as she could; if she

came back to the Game or in his orbit at all, it would not be of her own volition. Hannibal pocketed the bottle, a strange whimsy guiding his hand. Just as quietly as he had made his way in, the nobleman snuck out with the patrolling guards none the wiser.

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, this was a lot more difficult then I thought to write. I mashed Sakizuke and Hassun together to ease personal flow, but I had to drag myself through the middle of the chapter for almost a week before I could reach the end. While I was editing it, I felt a little better, but not much. The very last thing I wrote was the Seeker squad drinking together and I worry that it shows. Eck. I'm hoping next chapter will be better.

Mar solas ena mar din

Chapter Summary

> "Being Tranquil didn't sound so bad to him. He'd been terrified of being swallowed up by the darkness for so long it seemed like it would be a relief to get it over with. You were only scared of becoming nothing until you were nothing. Just like dying." - Dragon Age: Asunder by David Gaider

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> PLEASE READ
> So, there are a lot of trigger warnings that are going to come with this chapter. There is a discussion of suicide, assisted suicide (and mentions of them after the fact), attempted suicide, and mention of sexual abuse. For those of you familiar with Hannibal, it's Takiawase/Bee Lady and Bella episode. For those familiar with Dragon Age, one word and it is Cole. These areas also have spoilers for the novel Dragon Age: Asunder and Cole's personal quest in Dragon Age: Inquisition. So, if you want to avoid that, skip this. I will be including a spoiler-free and hopefully vague run-through of the plot important stuff that you missed in the end notes. All of it primarily takes place in Jack and Hannibal's part of the story so look for the following POV breaks:
> ~<( )>~ (Flaming Eye/Jack)
> V^-V-^V (Antlers/Hannibal)
> I'm going ahead now and saying that I don't share the many of the views of the characters in this chapter. I'm drawing a lot from the episode and games as well as my own experience with depression and attempted suicide. If you are dealing with this, please talk to someone, whether with a trusted confidante or with a suicide helpline. I am speaking from personal experience when I say that while it won't suddenly fix everything, it can help.
>
> Mar solas ena mar din: Your pride will be your death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack and Bella lied next to each other in bed, the husband basking in the relief and slight victory that had come that day. Will would not be made Tranquil. Of course, he was being sent with the High Seeker instead, but he would live. Jack would make sure that none of the bullshit that had been pulled with Gideon would occur. He'd have to get permission from the Lord Seeker, but Jack had his ways. He wasn't going to abandon Will to his fate.

He was going to be moved the morning of the day after tomorrow. Jack had already put in his request, but the Lord Seeker hadn't gotten back to him yet. In the meantime, he would be spending time with his wife. She told him that she would be glad to move to Verchiel and that the Empress didn't really have more to do for her anyway. He… slightly doubted that. There was always more work that an ambassador could do. Jack didn't argue though, because he had seen how much weaker Bella was becoming. She had been spending more and more time inside, in bed. The wasting disease was in rapid decline, even their healer wasn't going to be able to keep it at bay forever.

"Jack," Bella said quietly. He already knew that he wasn't going to like where this was going. He rarely did when she used that voice. "When I die, I'd like it if you didn't have a spirit healer on sight." She turned to him, dark eyes large and grieved. "I don't want to be revived, and I don't want my soul to stay here a while longer. When I go, I go."

"I knew I wasn't going to like it."

She took his hand and squeezed it in her own. He thought on the words Hannibal spoke to him mere days ago. Soon Bella would be gone and he would be left alone in the world. When he was a much younger man, Jack was ready to take on everything. That young man didn't think that he needed anything tangible, let alone anyone. He had his faith and his duty. The prospect of a future without Bella tore him open now and left a rotting hole in his chest.

They curled into each other, embracing in their bed. Soon, they would be leaving this apartment behind, but not yet. "I know what to expect from wasting disease. You remember that my mother died of the same? I watched her go through exactly what I'm going through now."

"I know you did," he responded. Jack recalled when she first told him about what she was going through. They had stayed up the entire night, him comforting her and simply allowing her to speak. He offered aid and support in any way that he could, but that didn't stop her from dying. It was then that they knew they loved each other and wanted to stay by each other's side.

"I remember sitting by her bed when she woke up in such pain that all she could do was scream my name. I didn't know how to help her, so I did nothing. I just sat there and waited for her to fall back asleep."

He caressed her face, already marred by dark circles under her eyes. He loved her; Jack adored this strong and brilliant woman so much it burst out of him when they saw each other. He offered the only words of comfort he could give. "There was nothing you could do."

Bella stilled his hand, holding it against her cheek. "There will be a time when there's nothing you can do." She released him. "I don't want you to remember me pleading with you to make the pain stop."

Jack kissed her forehead, trying to pour all of his adoration into the gesture. "It's not how I'm going to remember you. I will remember walking the Rialto with you, window shopping on the streets of Antiva, the smell of fresh leather and grapes. I'm going to remember you coming to bed with ink stains on your hands and smelling like parchment. I'm going to

remember going to a tavern on our first outing and how you dressed down a man that was coming on to you." He kissed both of her hands, calloused as a scribe's. "I'm going to remember you as beautiful as you are right now."

Bella's voice shook. She was crying. "Good, because I don't want to lie in bed and waste away while you watch. I'm going to insist on a few things for as long as I can. And that's one of them."

"When you can't insist anymore, I will do the insisting for you," Jack said and hoped that he could keep that promise, despite how much his insides screamed at losing her too soon.

<<(|)>>

"I really appreciate you helping with this," Beverly informed Comte Hannibal Lecter as she set up their mystery body. "We're trying to find out more about the circumstances surrounding this one's death, considering that she had the Blight. The hope is that we can find out how long she was there to give us a better timeline of our other killer." The Seeker had asked for Hannibal's help to try and prod at him; it wouldn't be easy to navigate an accomplished player's abilities in the Game for her own ends, but the end result would be worth it. If this went well, Beverly would have information about the death of their Blighted killer and then some on their dear Comte. Will had been pointing fingers at the man so much that she wanted to get a read on him.

Hannibal smiled, gently amused. "You do realize that I am not a Mortalitasi nor was I ever apprenticed to one. The only information I will be able to provide is what I have come across thanks to my own curiosity."

"It's more than I have," Beverly replied and finished her last couple of measurements on the body before readjusting for her assistant.

"And you did not call for one of your more experienced colleagues?"

She shrugged, trying to put him off of the scent. "They've seen these plenty of times, and we've still only hit dead ends. You were able to give us something with Lady Rolandre d'Ombre. I thought that the fresh perspective could be helpful."

The both leaned into the body, watching the individuals flakes of skin separate with each delicate touch. The Seekers had to be extra careful with how it was handled. It was just a ghoul, so simply touching the body wouldn't give someone the Blight, but if the diseased flesh came into contact with an open wound, the poor sucker should hope that a Grey Warden was nearby. Otherwise, they would find themselves tainted and death would come for them soon.

A voice spoke by her ear; Beverly hadn't realized the man had been that close. "Have you found any evidence on her friend?"

She shrugged. "Probably not a friend. Just someone that understood her."

“So you agree with Will?” he asked. “I was unaware that he would be working so closely with you.”

“We have an arrangement,” Beverly replied flatly, hoping to finish that line of dialogue.

“Oh?”

She sighed. “I don’t believe it is a good idea to talk about it. Suffice it to say, he helps me and I help him. Nothing bad, nothing illegal, and nothing against my code. That’s how it works.”

The Seeker couldn’t see the expression on the other man’s face. She wasn’t sure that she wanted to. “It’s good that he has an ally in all of this.”

“He has you, doesn’t he?” she shot back. “We noticed how often you keep visiting him.”

He hummed. “My allegiance has been made more difficult by the fact that he was telling everyone that I committed the crimes that he has been accused of. Hard to be a friend to someone that doesn’t want one, especially in you.”

“I honestly haven’t heard him say anything. As far as I know, he hasn't been calling you a killer at all.” Beverly smiled, trying to look as unassuming as possible. The stare on the Comte’s face was the one he always seemed to have, so she wasn’t sure if it worked or not.

“Who is he saying killed our Blighted friend?”

She returned to work. “He doesn’t know. Will does believe that the way the ghoul was treated means that a clue is highly probable. Something hidden.”

“A signature of some sort?” The man actually seemed curious. “Something to explain why a person would seek to expose the killer in such a brutal manner?”

“Clearly, they had some kind of goal,” Beverly said, immediately getting to work. With heavy duty leather gloves over her hand and her nose and mouth wrapped up, she grabbed a knife and began digging under the sewed-on cloths and skins. The Comte grabbed a rag to cover his own face while he observed her; for a noble, he certainly didn’t seem to mind her being willing to get her hands dirty in front of him.

“Clearly. We must look at the actions beyond the intentions, dig deep to find the real source of the scene.”

So Beverly did, her hands went further than what was necessary, prodding the insides of the cadaver. That’s when Beverly came to a suspiciously empty place inside of the corpse.

The rest of their encounter carried on in awkward half-silence. Beverly’s discomfort around the noble did not abate, grating away against her nerves while she tried to concentrate. The only thing she ended up succeeding in was amassing a headache. Comte Lecter did give her some notes to take to Brian about Mortalitasi non-magical cadaver preservation, but it wasn’t like she could really make anything out of it. To actually accomplish something, Beverly decided now would be a wonderful time for her to approach Will and give him the good news. She had been given permission to travel with him to the Bastion d’Argent. Jack had

been pestering the Knight Vigilant and the Lord Seeker for permission to travel with Will to the Bastion, but had been denied. The Senior Seeker wasn't someone that would allow others to tell him no so easily, so he kept insisting that it would be better if people that knew Will were around him rather than novices that trained at the fortress.

He had been told he could send one person and that person could not be named Jack Crawford. Jack sent Beverly, his second, in his stead. Neither of the boys seemed too broken up about it, but Jack was disquieted by their insistence. Apparently, they wanted to give Will time for assessment at the Bastion without Crawford's interference (which seemed like an excuse to do whatever the fuck they wanted to Beverly) and instead gave him bureaucratically required leave stemming from Jack's evaluation. He'd probably be forced to stay for another month if not longer.

The Seeker hefted the book of notes under her arm as she was allowed into her former best friend's cell. Will was doing exercises on the cold floor, which didn't strike her as pleasant. He glanced up at her, blue eyes smiling with his lips. "Now that I'm not going to die any time soon, I can't let my muscles atrophy." Fair enough. He had been largely sedentary for over the last month. It was a health concern, and one that it didn't Beverly bother to indulge. It was another thing she would have to protect when they got to the Bastion, though. His guards might be under the impression that he had to act in a certain manner or they had permission to break his legs.

Beverly sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you get to do that often enough."

Will sat up and cooled down. "You will?"

"I'll be accompanying you. You won't just have Chilton for company."

"Thank the Creators," he prayed, smiling at her. The grin was still strained though, a small bit of forced cheer and another reminder that things weren't completely resolved between the two of them. She had to work through every interaction to get him here, and even then it hadn't been much. This was the first time that she had been to see him that she hadn't started with business.

By the way that Will was looking at the notes, he knew that it was coming. It hurt, both of them knowing that she couldn't ever be there for a simple visit. Beverly was trying.

She was.

What relationship they had before made her feel like she needed an excuse to be there. The scare of Tranquility had her coming to terms with her wish to see him and the ever increasing belief that Will was innocent. What it did not do was make the aftermath any easier. She wanted to mend it, their friendship, but Beverly was never good at fixing things, only analyzing them.

"Here," she said as she handed the booklet to him. He grasped the binding and brought it to his side of the bars, gingerly leafing through the pages. Once, Beverly had watched him with wary eyes, but now she just felt sad. The half-elf tried to determine what must be going on in

the mage's mind, trying to grasp his thoughts as they flitted by. "As you can see," she directed him to a specific passage. "I found a couple of organs missing. The area around it is extremely diseased and we haven't found anything extra in the others, so they probably took the missing organs with them. I presume the killer knew what was wrong and came prepared or was just that cautious."

A page turned, then another, then another. "None of the others were missing anything?"

She shrugged. "Not anything that wasn't found on other bodies." All of the internal organs were found intact, she had them checked after her discovery. All of the skin seemed to be mostly accounted for except for a few rips and tears, probably from travel.

"It was definitely a different killer," Will muttered. "The last one was more presentational as well." It was and Beverly said as much. "What about another killer that was just as presentational?" He looked away. "Killers?"

"What are you getting at?" Beverly asked, edging closer.

"There was a certain amount of theater to this kill, some drama." Beverly had said as much when they found the bodies. "The copy killer was the same way." He swallowed slightly. "So is the Highwayman. There are two things the Highwayman is known for: presentation and taking organs."

She had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Look, she believed that Will was innocent, but if the next words coming out of Will's mouth were what she thought they would, Beverly didn't know what she would say. "Now you're saying that Comte Hannibal Lecter is the Highwayman?" That aristocrat was far too fussy.

Will's expression was anything but amused. He enunciated his syllables like each one was accompanied by a glob of spit. "I'm saying **also** the Highwayman. You said that the bodies had evidence of Mortalitasi preservation methods and treatment. Comte Lecter is familiar with the Mortalitasi."

"Not in any official capacity. He had only a passing interest. He informed me thusly when I asked him to help with some study of the body."

The air went deadly still. The energy in the air crackled and sputtered to a stop before sinking to her feet.

The only current in the room was Will's whispered, "You what?"

He stood up and began pacing. To not remain in the uncomfortable seated position, Beverly stood with him, but remained in one spot. She saw that he had already worn a fine tread into the floor with his nervous movement. "You invited him to help you."

Beverly argued, "Brian wasn't available. I needed someone to help me find evidence and he did. He suggested that I look further and that's when I noticed the missing organs."

“Missing, Beverly. Missing! He showed you that there wasn’t any evidence at all.” He nearly began to hyperventilate and Beverly rushed to the bars, reaching out a hand to give him something grounded. Will danced away. “He’s been toying with me for months and now he’s doing it to you. Stay away from him. Please.” A few moments passed and then he grasped her hand, bringing it close to his chest. “Please. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Don’t worry,” Beverly said with a smile. “As far as I know, he has to stay here in Val Royeaux. They may let him in here due to the proximity of the Empress, but I doubt he would be allowed in the Bastion.”

V^-V-^V

Bella’s visit was most fortuitous. They had a brief discussion about where the happy couple would be going next, which let him know that he most definitely would be needing to have the Verchiel estate prepared. Not that Hannibal hadn’t already been planning on it, he understood enough about the Seekers, especially Prurnell and Chilton, to say that it was easy to predict where they would stick the wayward mage. It was always nice to have confirmation though.

It was wonderful how things work out. His whole life, Hannibal had heard that the Maker works in mysterious ways. Times like these, he’s inclined to not only agree but also revel in the favor he seemed to have.

He kissed her hand in a gentlemanly way. “I am honored to be in your presence, Lady Crawford.”

She gave a gentlewomanly bow, which caused some pain to flare up. Hannibal guided Bella to a chair posthaste and helped her be seated. He had already been told that her initial reason for the visit was to have someone to speak to. She had been reminded of their conversations months ago, back when she was visiting in Red Crossing, and how it had helped her put things in perspective. Jack had been confiding in her, but now she needed to confide in someone. As a lot of her topics involved Jack, he could not be the one she spoke to.

When Hannibal returned to her with a cool drink of water, she grimaced while taking the glass from him. The movement had caused another flare. “I should never have let Jack talk me into seeing a healer.”

He sat across from her, allowing the marble walls of the study to echo every sound. None of the servants would disrespect him by spying here, but Abigail could use the entertainment. “He is only trying to extend your life.”

“He’s trying to extend a quality of life that’s not worth the effort,” Bella corrected and flew into a coughing fit.

“Jack’s effort or yours?” Hannibal asked once she had gathered herself again.

“Both, I suppose,” she responded, catching her breath. A deep inhale and exhale followed by a single cough before she was calm again. The human body was such a fragile thing and so prone to betraying its inhabitant. “Everything is deteriorating. It’s called a wasting disease for

a reason." Bella barked a laugh, but it was a bitter one. "I have no energy, but I can barely sleep. My appetite is nonexistent, even when I know I'm hungry. Anything I have eaten is expelled the next day, one way or another, and the cycle continues."

"Jack will stay by your side through all of it. He loves you, and when you are gone, the grief will haunt him greater than any ghost."

She breezed by him. "**When** I am gone. My ghost is inevitable, no matter his wishes. He told me he would be my second, fighting the war by my side, but these battles take a toll." Bella sighed. "I'm ready to surrender."

"You are considering ending your life?" Hannibal asked, curious about the prospect and the potential it had for the couple.

She closed her eyes, not daring to observe his reaction. "It seems like a valid solution to my problems."

He smiled, but hid it behind careful grace and good breeding. "How does that make you feel?"

She returned his smile, despite not being able to see it. It was the first genuinely happy one that his Lordship thought he had seen in a long time. "Alive." The eyes opened. "And you?"

He felt that he could be honest in this instance. It might help her and he didn't mind where this story decided to go on its own. Not yet, at least. "I find the prospect comforting. Knowing that my life could end at any moment allows me to fully appreciate the beauty, art, and horror of everything this world has to offer. I can throw myself into my passions, assuring myself that I will never leave this world thinking that I wasted a single moment."

Bella's smile waned, but not by much. Hannibal decided to change the subject. "So I heard that Will is being moved back to the Bastion. I presume that Jack will follow."

"As soon as he is able, but they aren't letting him off just yet." The Comte nodded. He had assumed as much. Jack was being investigated at the same time as Will, and they would want to lessen any potential influence the mage could have, despite it being negligible at best (the likelihood that Will had done anything on purpose was minimal to none). "I'm going ahead to Verchiel to get us a place to stay, and to-" she hesitated. "And to get away from Jack for a little bit. I need some time to think on my own, come to some of my own conclusions."

"Are you going to continue to see a healer?"

Bella sighed and picked at her outfit. It was rather plain. The dress was far more beautiful than anything owned by a peasant, but was nothing compared to the outfits he had seen her in previously. "I am bringing one with me. Jack's insistence. After I get to Verchiel? I don't know."

Hannibal put up the offer. "I am going to go to Verchiel as well. I'd hate to be separated from any potential developments." The former ambassador struck a quizzical look and the Comte had the sudden feeling that Bella had perhaps had heard of the rumors of his and Will's

romantic involvement and was trying to suss out whether or not they were true based on his comment. The expression left just as quickly, whether she had come to her own conclusion or simply decided that she wasn't that concerned. "Why don't I accompany you?"

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Will kept his expression as serene and innocent as possible while High Seeker Frederick Chilton prowled and paced on the other side of his little cage. He was leaving tomorrow for the Bastion d'Argent on another long journey along the Imperial Highway. Yes, three weeks was a long time. Until further notice, he was under the High Seeker's tender care and observation, which made him more than a little uncomfortable. The way the man was looking at him was hungry, an unattractive combination of physical attraction (which had only increased upon Will's placement here and wasn't that a mess to be unpacked later) and greed for what his mind could offer. The elf was well aware that Chilton's end goal was to find an alternative to Tranquility, but as noble as that could potentially be, the more he spoke about it the more it seemed like he was in it for the glory.

More notable was the Lord Seeker's reaction when she was in the room. There was a brief discussion after Beverly left about what was going to be expected of him, and there was an aura that exuded from the self-righteous woman. It made him nervous.

This time, the High Seeker was away from his superior. If the way he glanced down the hall and spoke in hushed tones with his guard was any indication, Frederick most likely did not have permission to be there by his lonesome. Whatever he was going to say, he did not want Kade to hear it.

"I'd like to make a deal."

Not what he was expecting, but not out of character. Upon further reflection, Will wasn't entirely sure **what** he had been expecting, but it wasn't a deal. He thought that Chilton would just do whatever he pleased, not try and make Will a part of that arrangement.

"What kind of deal?" the elven mage asked, more than slightly suspicious.

"I would like you to be cooperative during testing. I'd like to take the chance to understand your mind and see how it could further my cause."

Cooperation. He wasn't denying that he would do it without Will's acquiescence, but he was offering something up instead. "And in exchange?" he prodded.

Frederick sighed and sized Will up. "In exchange, I allow you dignity and amenities. You'll still be guarded, but allowed a small form of privacy. There would be scheduled exercise so that you won't be cramped in a dungeon all day." He hesitated, before relaxing his posture and smirking. "If you're good, I'll even keep them from drugging you, maybe even allow a spell or two." A pause. "Under supervision of course." The High Seeker's words were meant to wheedle and to see if Will was actually going to behave. The smarminess of his attitude would have put Will off, and nearly did, if he hadn't seen it for what it was: an act. Frederick was desperate to make this as painless on himself as possible and that required Will's willingness.

It wasn't bad, but there was something else Will also wanted.

"I know you eat dinner with the Comte sometimes and that he is planning to move back to his estate in Verchiel." Beverly had informed him. Considering that they had derived joy from his prospective absence in the previous conversation, it wasn't something he was looking forward to. "I would also like you to not discuss anything about me with him."

They stared at one another, sizing each other up through the bars.

"You'll cooperate completely? Allow me to run my tests and do my research unimpeded?"

Will grinned. Frederick was going to agree. "Every test, all of the research. Anything that might be a necessity, I'll acquiesce too. If you give everything you've offered and you refuse to discuss me or anything happening with the Comte, you'll have no problems from me."

The High Seeker inclined his head and the bargain was struck.

Eventually, Frederick left. The light outside of Will's cell faded. The sunset glow washed through the room, turning the otherwise grey stone a russet color. Night was fast approaching and Will was actually going to try and sleep this time. Rest for the road ahead.

The cell door opened, however, and any thoughts of sleep fled him. For a moment, Will thought he had to be wary for another visitor, but the face that popped in was a comfort and forgiveness all in one. Cole was there to see him, despite their last argument. The young man ventured inside, right past the Seeker that wasn't even watching the young man. Will greeted his 'guest' who rested against the bars.

"I'm sorry that I can't help you," the blonde whispered, sounding genuine grieved. "I wanted to help you be free before they took you away."

"You heard that?" Will asked. "It's alright. I'll be better off where I'm going than here." He hesitated for a moment before asking: "Would you like to come with me?"

Cole shook his head. "I can't leave."

"You can't?"

"I-" Cole vibrated from head to toe. "I can't leave. I won't. I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Will reassured, trying to comfort the other. Their disagreement seemed to be largely forgotten and that was a slight relief. The elf wasn't good at apologizing, it always came out as awkward or insincere depending on the person and his relationship with them.

Cole calms and then straightens slightly. He gestures to the dagger ever present at his side. "Do you want me to free you?"

"No thank you," Will replied empathically.

Cole blinked and looked down at his hands, gathering his strength. "Can I ask you something?"

“Of course.”

The young man stared at Will, grey eyes boring into his mind and beyond “Can you promise not to forget me?”

Will thought back to their initial meetings, only half-formed childhood memories in his head and smothered in a fog. He thought about how long it took him to realize that he was having a visitor and how much longer it was for him to recognize Cole without there being an issue. He stifled a grimace, not fond of making promises he couldn’t keep.

He had already done that with Abigail.

“I’ll certainly try.”

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Nimble fingers carefully tucked the end of the line through one hoop and out the other. They were guided by a larger, but no less dextrous set that was helping to make up for some of the clumsiness of inexperience. Abigail snorted as she once again missed looping the end of the string though and Will could only smile. One could suppose it was the sorrows of innocence lost that the reminders of youth brought.

Today they were fishing. Will wasn’t as experienced a fisherman, what little the Dalish found in streams was usually netted rather than reeled in and they didn’t spend a lot of time near standing water or the ocean (at least his Clan hadn’t). He had told her once that doing so was too dangerous and too likely to draw the attention of those that took offense to unbound mages and elves in the same breath. Will had told Abigail many a time about his youth in the Clan. There were plenty of stories where he had gotten right up to the prey with his quiet feet and hands, but accidentally loosed his arrows upon a nearby tree truck (or once the ass of a particularly nasty fellow Clan mate). He had tried to avoid saying it, but he knew that she knew that he had never improved, evident with how he had taken down her father. They never made jokes about his accuracy with a bow for very long.

“Here you go,” Will declared with a smile, stepping back from the beaming Abigail. “It’s called a blood knot.” They both stood from where they were reclining on the river bank (although river was a generous term for the shallow thing they were going to stand in), and waded into flowing water. The current pushed back against them, but they didn’t let it control their legs for them. Once they reached an ideal spot, Will blushed a little. “I’m not the greatest fisherman, but I’ll do my best.”

“Practice for both of us.”

“Very encouraging. Blind leading the blind.”

“You hunted didn’t you? Isn’t it the same thing; one you stalk the other you lure?” she asked.

In exchange, he gave her a wry smile. “One you catch, the other you conquer?” He said the words like they had a meaning behind them, and that made her pause. Naturally, he noticed. “What is it?”

Abigail sighed and lowered her pole, line unextended. "What are you trying to catch?"

Will turned away, avoiding her accusing eyes. Abigail wasn't able to turn away, entranced by whatever she saw in him. He whispered, "The one who caught you and didn't let you go."

Bittersweet. "The one that got away." He was still keeping her at arm's length, even here. It stung that her thoughts even portrayed Will as aloof, but there was a niggle in the back of her brain that something was amiss.

"I may not know much, but I do know this: if you catch a fish once and it gets away, it's a lot harder to catch a second time."

"Have to be smarter than the fish." They both knew he wasn't talking about a fish.

From the water just a little to the east of them (judging by the sun), a fish sprung up from the stream, arcing gracefully before splashing back in the water. They meandered over, the light of the afternoon sun blinding superficially. Will elaborated, "You have to be connected to it. The fish is in this current, and you are in it with him. You need to think clearly, be in control of your emotions, and act efficiently. Be close, and never let the fish know that you're fishing."

Abigail smiled, remembering times at Red Crossing when some of the older men would come into the herbalist shop when they were dropping off supplies. They showed them their wounds and scars, bragging about the haul they brought in. "Don't fisherman lie about what they catch?" she asked with a smile.

Will laughed, thinking about hunters among the Dalish and the Avvar, prideful of their abilities. "Or don't catch," he replied, earning laughter from her as well.

She sobered. "They think you're lying about the one that got away." Her own role in that still stung. Hannibal was trying to make it better, but he wasn't capable of soothing some burns.

"That's why I have to catch him," Will declared, resolute. It put a pit in her stomach. She didn't want Hannibal caught, but she didn't want Will to remain in the situation he was in. In order for that to happen, someone else needed to become at fault for the copy killer crimes and it needed to be extremely obvious and irrefutable. Even then, he might not be let free. She wanted him free.

"Mmmm," the younger brunette hummed and fiddled with her line, trying to avoid responding.

He eyed her, but eventually shook his head. Dream Abigail (and he was a Dreamer, he knew this had to be the Fade talking) usually wished him luck or hoped for his victory. Her answer here was extremely noncommittal. Will shook his head and moved his eyes to the line in his hand. Almost far away. "The last thing you do before casting a line is name the bait after somebody you cherished."

She raised her eyebrows. "So you can say goodbye?"

“The superstition is that if the person you named it after cherished you, you’ll catch the fish,” Will informed her and prepared to cast it. She watched him, rapt, and he threw his arm back and forward, watching the line extend and snap out into the river.

“What did you name it?” Abigail asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Will whispered, “Abigail.”

She died all over again.

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Abigail bolted awake, the dream that she just experienced more vivid than anything she had ever had before. She could have sworn that she actually spoke with Will, had a genuine conversation with him. Most of her dreams with the elven man involved him yelling accusations or dying at her feet. If they weren’t those, she dreamed about actual moments that they experienced together, although it was probably through the lens of her experiences with him. Instead, he was showing her how to fish and talking about his plans to take down Hannibal using their activity as a metaphor. It wasn’t a memory or a nightmare; they simply fished and talked.

Neither of them were good at either, awake or asleep.

The memory of the dream was visceral enough that she thought about it for the rest of the morning, even long after she usually forgot the details of others. Her mind seemed to be hanging on to it, gripping every detail in case it dissipated, faded back to the Fade.

Around lunch, Hannibal came to call on her. He had been spending more and more time with her lately, which she appreciated. His visits were the only real break she had from the monotony of living within the walls of this place. He was the only unmuffled voice she heard most days, the only one that ever spoke back. For that reason, she knew that she needed to confide in him about the strange dream. He enjoyed puzzles and this would be a mystery for the both of them.

“You dreamed this?” Hannibal inquired, tinged with wonder. He was always freer with her, something that she enjoyed. Mostly, this was because he could be most of himself with her. Naturally, she knew that he kept plenty from her, but she was privy to more than the rest of the world.

Even Will, which had to irk him from time to time.

“I did. It felt so real, like I was actually talking to him.”

“I believe, dear Abigail, that he was.”

That had her dumbstruck. “He was actually speaking with me?”

Hannibal nodded. “Due to their consciousness in the Fade, Dreamers can traverse around it at will. One aspect of this is that they can walk into other dreams. I believe Will may have already been asleep and walked into yours, allowing you both to speak.” He paused, and

there was a quick flash across his face, but it was gone without a trace before she could parse it. “You two must have quite the connection for him to unintentionally do this. It is strong enough that you remembered the encounter, despite the fact that you are not a mage, much less a Somniari.”

The bond between them was strong enough for him to reach across dreams and for her to remember it? That was incredible and filled Abigail with delight. If she had seen the emotion on Hannibal’s face and recognized it, the young woman might have changed the intensity of her reaction. Instead of grinning and repeating Hannibal’s phrase and then gushing about it, she might have denied it or simply remained as subdued as possible.

On Hannibal, jealousy never boded well.

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Will woke gradually, trying to hold onto the precious fragments of his dream, the memory of Abigail given life. It was all he had of her anymore, the rest stolen by a blade in a friendly hand. It was a relief that he hadn’t experienced one of his more volatile dreams. A few times, he had witnessed what he thought was a vision of Abigail’s demise: how Hannibal had lured the girl in and murdered her. The further away that dream was, the better he felt.

The clacking of the metal boots and extended greaves that were preferred by the Seekers sounded down the hall, so Will forced himself to hasten his usually gradual coming to awareness. A quick glance out the window showed only the barest hint of orange light. It was dawn exactly. They wanted him gone as soon as possible. They really were serious about lessening whatever influence he might have.

Beverly entered with very little pomp and circumstance. She had apparently told the Seeker at the door not to come in with her. “Hey. Sorry about the time, but the Knight Vigilant is kicking us out.”

Will snorted, “Kicking us out?”

“He’s paranoid about a dreamer being in the place.” She held out a small vial, one that he knew well by now. It was some of the drugs they had given him on the way here, something to make him a bit more compliant and unable to do magic without someone constantly needing to suppress and drain him. They also knocked him unconscious rather than put him to sleep, which prevented him from dreaming. Will never understood why that was the case, but something about it didn’t allow him into the Fade.

“I know this stuff tastes like shit and feels worse, but they won’t let you leave the room without it and they aren’t going to let you stay here alive much longer. The bastards.” Beverly approached the bars and extended her hand through them. This was the closest she had been to him since he left Halamshiral for Red Crossing. His mind flashed to the last time he saw her before he tried to kill Hannibal. Of her betraying his trust and every moment that came after. His former best friend had been working her way back to him and he to her.

Will took the vial delicately, careful not to drop it. If this was the only way that he was going to be allowed to leave and still breathe, so be it. At least he wouldn’t remember any of it. His

hand unstopped it before he could psyche himself out and the mage downed the foul liquid. It was acrid and gave him the distinct impression of mold, which always left his throat itching.

Dizziness hit him first and Will stumbled until he was resting on the cot. “Don’t worry,” Beverly whispered when he glanced to the door leading out. “I’m not going to let them in until you’re out. No one is going to see you like this.” It was more comforting than it should be. The Templars and Seekers would still see him while he was unconscious and he would be a lot more vulnerable then, but at least he wouldn’t be awake and helpless. With that thought, he surrendered to the grey haze of oblivion.

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Much to Jack’s general distress, Bella left with Comte Lecter for Verchiel that morning. He was worried about her more than he had been in months; her health was declining at a faster rate. Granted, she probably wouldn’t be going out for several more months if the healer had anything to say about it, but in Jack’s head he could see the days going by. They just entered what would be the last month of summer, and he wondered. Jack wondered if she would live to even see winter, let alone spring.

The Seeker had longed to take Bella to Antiva, but he wanted to see this thing through with Will to the end. The young man had to be settled in at the Bastion and Jack had to know what kind of shenanigans Chilton was going to be subjecting him to before Jack would go. Bella knew that very well and had even been in agreement when he confessed his concerns to her. That didn’t mean that the pang of guilt for delaying their retreat from society went away.

Of course now, he was stuck at the White Spire for a month. That meant roughly seven to eight weeks before he got to see Bella again. Seven weeks of their precious time together just gone. Jack wanted to respect her decision to go and seek out some comfort, find herself away from him. There was always the chance that by the time he got to see her again, it would be standing by her funeral pyre. The frustration was getting to him, compiling stress on top of stress. Every member of the squad. **Every. Single. One**. They all asked him if he wanted to go to the Summer Market’s spa for something called a steam bath and a massage. That was not going to happen.

Instead, Jack resorted to his go-to reliever for stress: work.

The unfortunate aspect of relying on work in order to forget about painful situations is that a lack means that you are dwelling on the pain and the irritation at not finding a relief from it. Furthermore, the inquiry into his conduct meant that he couldn’t take any official jobs as a Seeker nor could he help the city guard or Templars with anything they needed. He was stuck trying to supply himself with something to do. Fortunately for his squad, Jack found it while he was overseeing Will’s unconscious body being removed from the cell to a stretcher and then to a transport. Something fell out of the young elf’s shirt while they were moving him, which left him falling behind the rest of the group to retrieve the item.

It was a small Mabari figurine made of clay. It was pretty or even well done, but its features were detailed enough to distinguish it from a regular dog. The craftsmanship indicated that it was done by someone that was not a professional, but the subject matter meant it was someone that knew Will well enough to make it an obvious Mabari hound. Jack was also

completely sure that Will did not have the statue prior to arriving at the White Spire. The Seeker took it upon himself to oversee the mage's search to ensure that the Templars did not take advantage of their position and try anything untoward. So, someone gave it to him while he was in the Spire.

The sound of metal grinding against metal broke Jack from his thoughts and he glanced around. The convoy transporting Will was long gone, but Beverly had promised that she wouldn't let Will out of her sight until he had a trustworthy guard on him in the Bastion d'Argent. The noise was also coming in the opposite direction that the group had gone: further into the dungeon. Mentally shrugging, Jack followed it. Ever since Will moved there, he had made it his business to know what was going on in the area, and there were only about three other prisoners down here, all of whom were as locked up as tight as Will was (only without guards). The sound was similar to that of a door being opened and closed, but none of the mages were allowed to have visitors while others were being transported. Concerned, the Seeker ventured further into the dark, only the faintest torch light showing the way, to stop any abuse, sexual or otherwise, that might be occurring.

He checked each door, the ones with mages in them being marked, by peering through the grate. There was no one there. Quickly, Jack scoured the hallway spiraling down, in case the person was leaving and went the other way to avoid being caught. Once at the end, he went back the other direction, this time checking every cell and listening for another door. There wasn't one.

Finally, he went inside the cells to check on the mages verbally. At this point, the potential perpetrator had gotten away from his immediate grasp; that left him questioning the potential victims and hoping they weren't too scared to speak to him. He knew some Templars threatened the mages they abused with Tranquility or death, and Seekers still weren't immediately recognizable, despite their currently more public nature. More public did not mean that they were open or that they told people about their statuses or hierarchy after all.

Of course, the first cell is where he found the problem. It contained a young woman. She was found as an apostate, a hedge mage, reported by a new family to the village she belonged to. Her longevity apart from the Circle meant that her magic and actions had to be looked into by the Templars, just to be sure that she wasn't a maleficar or possessed. As Jack approached her, slowly and steadily to avoid spooking the mage, he noticed that she wasn't moving. He dropped his quiet stance and drew nearer, being a little louder to declare his position. No response.

Upon inspection, she wasn't moving either, not even the subtle rise and fall of breathing. He waited in case it was a trick, long past the point where someone could feasibly hold their breath. Nothing. Rushing, Jack opened up the bar portion of the cell and slipped inside to check her pulse.

He didn't need to. A deep, yet clean, gash went through her chest, probably piercing a lung. The stab wound trajectory showed that it was more likely to have gone through her heart, especially if the murderer was aiming to not hit the sternum. She was dead. He saw no weapon around, so this young mage's killer had taken it with him.

There was going to be evidence, and Jack was going to find it. Too many times, deaths like this were ruled as unfortunate accidents or not reported at all, but it was killing plain and simple. The murderer was going to be brought to justice.

He guaranteed it.

Deaths, especially mysterious deaths, had been occurring at Circles for centuries, so it wasn't a particularly new phenomenon, but when gathering information the first place Jack knew to look was the records. The Circle of Magi was required to keep strenuous documentation of any and all mages that passed through their halls, regardless of what happened to them. Between keeping track of the mages, phylacteries, magical studies, etc. and also finding a way to manage the Templar Order that monitored them, it was important that the archives were very well organized.

The real issue was the method of organization. In Jack's experience, the individual Circles had their own method of categorization, which only became a problem when a person did not have help. At the moment, the First Enchanter of the White Spire was meeting with the newly appointed Grand Enchanter Fiona of the Montsimmard Circle. The Fraternities were acting up again and calling for the Divine to send someone to investigate the Circles in Kirkwall and Tantervale. The Knight Vigilant took one look at him and shook his head. Jack also didn't feel comfortable asking any of the Tranquil; just the sight of the sunburst brand made him feel sick, considering what had almost happened to Will.

That left the Senior Seeker where he was at the moment, poring through any potential documentation of the murders. He started with the mages that were currently in holding (only the one had been killed) and then looked into the Templars stationed to watch over her. They were all clean. From there, Jack proceeded to check deaths recorded in the last month or so under similar circumstances. The work went on and on. In other words, Jack had essentially been living in this room for the past couple of weeks.

What he ended up finding was this: three other deaths exactly like the one he found, two more cleanly slit throats, and three where the blade went through the lungs. Every single death was done in a way that indicated another person where there should be none. Two of the deaths occurred in the cells and one of them was under guard when it happened. All of the others had gone off to secluded or private areas of the Spire and simply didn't come back (one occurred in the baths). Five of those six were apprentices; three of them had spoken about their fear of the Harrowing publicly, two of them were considered very weak in their magic, the other three were considered so powerful they were almost volatile. By the notes left in the margins from the Knight Vigilant, their were rumors among the apprentices that all five of them were likely to be made Tranquil. The exception among them was number six, the Enchanter. They were fairly accomplished, having shown magical talent and considerable restraint . They had a couple of apprentices, but had refused any more, citing research opportunities not being conducive to s student. In another three years, they would probably be considered a Senior Enchanter and might have been transferred to another Circle to become First Enchanter if their climb continued the way that it did. Nine total deaths and eight of them belonged to people that either had no future anyway or there was a strong possibility that they would not have one, but the last was accomplished and respected.

Jack was pondering this when the door opened. His mind was too absorbed to even recognize the intrusion until a hand landed on his shoulder. He looked up into Jimmy rice's face "Boss, you need to step away from this."

Jack violently shook the hand off and tried to go back to his research, though the two people he now felt at his back were immensely distracting. "I'm sorry, but I'm not letting this one go. There is a murderer running rampant through the halls of the White Spire and they are not going to be allowed to continue."

"Are you sure that's what this is about?"

He shot Jimmy a look. "It's not about Bella."

"I didn't say it," Brian added, taking a step back. Jack wasn't going t let him get out of this. While Jimmy and Brian argued constantly, it was usually about smaller things. Something like this where they are approaching him together meant they were in agreement.

"You didn't have to." Jack decided that he was going to have to ignore them if they kept going on like this. "Look, I'm trying to go through these records and find a specific pattern beyond the fact that there shouldn't have been an opportunity for these people to be killed. The White Spire has one of the largest Templar guards within its walls and one of the few non-Seeker Chantry institutions where Seekers are stationed regularly. Yet someone managed to get ahold of a weapon, not be caught, and then go around murdering mages."

He could feel Brian hovering over his shoulder and Jimmy started grabbing a few more ledgers off of the shelves. "If you're not going to leave it be, then I guess we're helping you." Both of them got to work. Their senior knew that this wasn't going to be the end of this discussion. His entire team was fairly tight-knit; they worried about each other. He would just have to keep them busy enough that they wouldn't fight him too much.

It took several more hours, but they finally found a disparity in the ledgers. It didn't actually seem all that related at first, but the victim profile seemed to work and the records about it were almost non-existent. The file in question was in those for mages pending trial, but Jack hadn't seen a notice for him during intake. He even double checked to be sure. It was put in almost an exact month before the first murder and there wasn't any documentation stating that the trial went through; there was nothing put in about an investigation even taking place either. The record stated that the young man, the given name was Cole with no last name added was accused of killing his entire family several years before with magic before going on the run.

He found nothing else.

"I think I've found something worth investigating," Jack declared to the room and his remaining squad crowded around him. "This might be our killer."

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Alana had been looking for Jack, Brian, and Jimmy everywhere. It had gotten to the point that she agreed to allow another Seeker to work with her for her arms training, since the rest

of the squad apparently couldn't be bothered. Their leader had been increasingly distant lately- Alana hadn't seen him since Beverly left- so the other two had been picking up his slack. It was nice to get some variety in her sparring partners. They certainly fought differently than Jack or Beverly. Jimmy had been trained by Templars, so his style was more suited to going up against mages and had primarily been adapted to going against ranged opponents, despite working in melee. He usually danced (even though he wore the heavy plate, which amazed her) around the field before charging in and taking her down quickly; she was still trying to adapt to him. Brian skirted the field as well, but was a lot more clumsy; he was the ranged combatant in the group. They ended up getting blunt-tipped arrows and he would shoot at her while navigating the halls; it had ended in more than a few bruises for her and those that got in their way.

Thankfully, someone else offered, so she didn't feel restless. The brunette was going to give the other two the what-for. They weren't getting out of that. Alana asked around for where they might have gone, which is how she ended up in the record archives. She didn't expect what would be inside the room.

All three of the rest of her squad were spread out among the ledgers, scrolls, and other tomes, printed pages littering every table and some places on the floor. The archivist was going to have a field day. Alana wondered whether or not this would be enough to break her Tranquility. The thought immediately darkened her mindset. "What are you doing?" she interrogated and all three of them dropped what they were going (literally in Brian's case).

The explanation was a wild one, and her response was automatic: "Are you going to tell the Lord Seeker?"

They paused. "What do you mean?" Jimmy asked.

She pointed out, "This is the Templars shirking their duty. Isn't it the Seekers' responsibility to report this kind of thing? If a mage is running around murdering people in the White Spire and they got out because someone managed to get into the records, you'd think they should have kept better track of it. It also seems like their trying bury the deaths."

Jack steeled himself and nodded empathically. "You're right. I think I was so caught up in solving the murders that I forgot the real problem behind it. We'll report it to the Lord Seeker right away."

They left immediately and Alana will never forget the look on the Lord Seeker's face when they confronted her with damning evidence of the Templars incompetency.

Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell took the notes they had made and the evidence they collected and plastered on the fakest smile she could muster. "Don't worry, I'll take care of this." She turned around and walked away. On a hunch, Alana followed her; Beverly had taught her a few tricks that helped her sneak around some of the more potent sentries.

Kade found the Knight Vigilant and showed him the records. Then, she ripped them in half and tossed them into the nearest fire.

Any respect the brunette had for the other woman vanished, and she left wondering what would become of their potential killer and his future victims. She needed to report her own findings to Jack.

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When Alana reported the actions of the Lord Seeker to Jack, he was exceedingly disturbed. He had suspected some bad behavior with the way she had approached the entire situation with Will and some of her actions regarding his and Chilton's behavior, but to go out of her way and cover it up? That was extremely upsetting. If the head of their Order was able to pull a stunt like that, the purpose of the Seekers of Truth as eroding.

Jack stopped his research immediately after he found out. The man needed some alone time to think on what had transpired. There was so much about this situation that was upsetting, and, without Bella to discuss it, collecting his thoughts were probably better done in private. So, he retreated to his office, hoping the peace and quiet would make a better place to reflect.

There was a young man sitting in his office. He had wide grey-blue eyes that were peering out at him from the fringe of his greasy blonde hair. He was pale (nearly translucent), dressed in rags, and prominent bones jutted from beneath the clothes. Whoever he was, the intruder was malnourished and sick. Jack didn't recognize him and there was no way he wouldn't stick out in the Spire dressed like that. Say what you will about the Circles, but they clothed, fed, and healed their mages. No urchin would have able to get in either, no matter how skilled they were at stealth. There were too many vigilant eyes about and this Circle didn't have any regular servants; the Tranquil usually kept up with those duties. There was only one person this could be.

"Cole, I presume?" Jack asked, and he startled.

"You- you can see me?" He shivered from head to toe. "But no! You shouldn't be able to! Your pain-" He gasped sharply, breath shuddering in. "Not yours! Hers!" Presumably Cole stepped forward, and Jack stood his ground. "Hers and his! You know Will?"

Jack held firm, but his inward thoughts were racing. He kept a lid on it, knowing that he would dwell on this conversation later. It was more important that he gathered as much information as he could before he drew premature conclusions. Cole apparently knew Will, either simply who he was or spoke with him directly. He also got into Jack's office, but did not expect the Seeker to actually recognize or see him. Food for thought. "I do know Will," he replied. "Do you?"

"Yes, I met him. He was hurting and felt alone. I wanted to help him, but he didn't want my help, so I left him gifts."

Jack moved around the desk, Cole circling in the opposite direct to keep it between them. Carefully, so as not to drive the young man into a panic, Jack pulled the Mabari figurine from a desk drawer. "Did you give him this?"

Cole beamed. "I did! I made it myself." Then, he frowned slightly and his posture drooped. "He dropped it? I hope he didn't mean to. I don't want him to forget me. He didn't forget me

and everyone else does."

"Forget you?" Jack inquired, pushing the quarry to speak. "What do you mean?"

Cole shrugged. "He couldn't see or remember me at first, but then he did. His pain grew strong enough that the little things I did stuck. He didn't want me to help him the way that I normally did, so I tried to in other ways. It was nice, being remembered. It made me feel real, more than it usually does when they finally see me."

"Feel real?"

"They usually forget me right after they look away. I don't make sense to them; it's like I'm not there."

Not there. Left alone to die in the dark thanks to misplaced paperwork, an investigation that wasn't expected and a trial that was never going to come. Forgotten. Maybe Cole wasn't a mage running rampant in the Spire killing mages that reminded him of his situation as Jack assumed. Perhaps Cole was dead and had been for some time. While there were skeptics in the group, Will was the one that said that ghosts did exist. It was the only reasonable explanation for what Cole could do that Jack could think of. Places where no one should be able to go wouldn't be a problem for the dead (although he didn't exactly know the rules for ghosts). That didn't explain why Cole was killing the mages, but Jack needed to confirm his theory first.

"Cole. Are you dead? Were you forgotten?"

Cole hummed, "I- I think I was. It was dark and there was hunger and thirst. I just wanted some food, but no one came. I was alone, so alone, and very cold. I- I don't." The body shuddered and Cole shook his head. "It hurts to think about, but they did forget me. No one remembered me and now no one can."

"Will could."

The boy nodded, and Jack's heart broke. "He could, but he has been gone for a while and won't be coming back. I don't think he'll remember for much longer. Could you give him the figurine, maybe as a reminder?"

"Let me write something down so I won't forget."

"Okay!" Cole exclaimed and sat back while Jack began writing. He did put down the note about the figurine, but didn't stop there. He kept writing, putting down on paper everything that Cole had said. Jack didn't want to start his search all over again and this information gave him closure on the case, even if Jack would never be able to bring it to his superiors. Of course, he needed to find a way to have Cole stop killing. A thought struck him and put a halt to his thoughts.

"Cole. What did you mean when you said they could finally see you?"

The young man tilted his head in a curiously birdlike manner. “They can usually only see me when they can’t go on. It hurts them and they want to die. So I ask and they agree for me to kill them and end their pain. I ask them to look at me in my eyes and see myself reflected back, knowing I had an effect on them and that I was the last thing they saw in this life.” He smiled. “I feel real. I was important to them and that made me feel like a person.”

Jack was horrified. “You can’t just kill people, Cole!”

Scrunching up his face, the boy shouted, “They asked me to! They were hurting and they wanted to die! Should I have said no? Some people in the Circle are hurt by the Templars and some know that they will be; if they don’t want to live any more and they are suffering, doesn’t it hurt them more to force them to live?”

Jack… Jack didn’t know what to say. Cole continued, “I can feel her hurt. She doesn’t want to stay, but you make her. Aren’t you hurting her more than letting her go? You don’t experience what they do or what she does. You imagine that them wanting to die is wrong and that you are strong enough to not in their position, but you don’t know.” Cole shuttered his eyes behind his hair and walked towards the door. While he was still in sight, Jack began writing furiously, glancing up to watch him walk out.

The last lines he wrote were, “Cole knows about Bella.” Then the door shut. Jack glanced down at the ink staining his hands and the page, wondering what he thought was so important that his penmanship suffered so.

It took far too long for Jack to figure it out. He spent an entire week deciphering his notes and wondering what exactly happened. All he remembered was going to his study for some peace and quiet and then his thoughts had lingered on the killer. He began to wonder about Will and his journey to the Bastion. His thoughts lingered on Bella and how she might have been doing. A letter from her should be coming any day now, letting him know about her safe arrival and settlement in Verchiel. His general drive to find the killer waned, almost to the point where the squad was worried **again**, but this time about something else. Brian called it uncharacteristic, but Jack called it letting go.

He was reminded one day while he was transcribing his muddled scribbles onto another sheet of paper. The words on the page seemed to flow into his eyes and right back out, as if he was re-reading a line in a book, but it was in a foreign language. Copying down the written word wasn’t enough and the information seemed to be encoded in his brain, unable to process. It was only after writing the same word three times in a row that he recognized it: mabari. Almost as if the word itself compelled him to do so, Jack pulled out the Mabari figurine that had dropped from Will when the young elf was being transported.

By magic, the memories were yanked out of some dark recess in his mind. The conversation with Cole, the revelations it brought, and his desperation to keep the closure it managed to bring slammed into his head and seeped into every thought. He stood from the desk, ready to reveal what happened to the rest of the group, but something stayed his feet. There was no way that he was ready to explain the encounter to the rest of the group. Even with all of the information, Jack still felt like he was trying to understand the encounter and make sense of Cole’s words. There was a lot he still needed some time to reflect on. Any conversation he would have with the others would have to come at a time when his own opinions on the

matter were in order. Jack was, at his heart, a pragmatic man. No matter what he did, nothing would prevent Cole from his actions, past, present, or future. None of them had the experience with ghosts needed to actually do anything about it and if Jack reported it to the Lord Seeker, there was a good chance that he would be complete brushed off.

So, Jack sat back down and spent a long period of time simply staring at the wall, unable to proceed.

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Will's arrival at the Bastion d'Argent came with little fanfare, but much pomposity, courtesy of one High Seeker Frederick Chilton. Beverly was kind enough to supply him the date when they arrived. According to the Chantry calendar, it was 22 Solace 9:33 Dragon, roughly three weeks since they started their journey. Most of said trip Will spent in various states of incoherence. They couldn't keep him unconscious the whole time; with the sheer amount of time that they kept him on the drugs on their original trip to the White Spire, the amount of time he spent under while at the White Spire, and the duration of their trip to the Bastion, he might develop some sort of tolerance to the drugs they were giving him or he would become so ill that he might perish. Neither of these outcomes were preferable to his new warden, so they had to make do. Poor Frederick.

They allowed him to be aware for the trip to his cell, which he had a feeling came more from Beverly than it did anybody else. She kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, expression betraying her concern and guilt over the whole affair. Both of these, Will had become immune to and only made him grow more frustrated at his situation. If all of these people were so worried about him and regretted the position he was in, why didn't they do anything about it? At least people like Chilton were honest in their attentions, despite how despicable he thought them.

The cell he was given was the exact same kind that was afforded to Abel Gideon when that man arrived. There were, however, some small amenities and dignity afforded to him. Chilton made promises as he was placed about books, extra clothes, better food and bedding, etc. Will would play along, of course. It's how he would get out of here.

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Hannibal's arrival in Verchiel closely followed Will Graham's although he was unaware of that. If he was, the noble would probably be immensely pleased with that fact, although he would claim it was because the elf wouldn't be able to make any moves without him present. This was despite the fact that Hannibal was still unable to monitor the moves that Will made and would have to ingratiate himself with Frederick Chilton if he wanted to achieve any access to his potential friend.

Abigail, naturally, followed him along. Hannibal easily smuggled her out of his estate in Val Royeaux as a servant, her position as his ward known more or less to the rest of them, if not her exact circumstances. All of the staff that was accompanying him were unerringly loyal and did not question his actions or motives. He paid well and treated them politely and kindly, hearing their requests and answer the reasonable ones. No Red Jenny would be able to buy them out from under him, partially because he had the current one in his employ as well.

They said it was better to be feared than loved; that worked well enough with the nobility, but did nothingf for staff. Those that used fear tactics on them often found their dirty laundry aired out to the public or with their vaults emptied and no way to link it back to the servants.

Nesiraya had been occupied with bringing his gift to dear Abigail to his relatively new chateau in Verchiel. She was likely to be very pleased and that would only bind her closer to him. It was a temporary one, but it would do its work properly. Shortly after his departure from Val Royeaux, Hannibal had received confirmation that the package was delivered safely to its new location in the hidden basement of the estate. Now, it was time for it to be received.

“I am aware that you do not want to be hidden again, but it is for your safety.”

“I understand,” Abigail said, and Hannibal knew that she did. He had made her very aware of the potential problems of revealing herself to the outside. He only did not inform her that many of those issues would arise from himself should she disobey him.

“I did, however, bring you a present. It is something to make you a little less lonely in the days to come.” He turned to her with a small half-smile, designed to make her trust him more and feel more at ease in general. “I know I wasn’t able to be there for you much in Val Royeaux, and unfortunately I am likely to get busier. This way, you won’t have to wait for me every day to get some socialization in.” He opened the hidden door to her new quarters. The torchlight and candles almost reflected off of her disastrously pale skin, and he made an idle note to find a way to get her more sun; it had gained a slightly healthier glow during their journey, but three weeks did very little. It was only going to get worse, and he would need to take better care of her before her final reveal to Will. If she didn’t appear healthy and comfortable, any trust built up might crumble.

They ventured down into the depths. The basement quarters that he had built into the house were far roomier than that in the old estate. Abigail wouldn’t be able to spy on the servants anymore, but with the staff as loyal as he had now, she wouldn’t need to. At this stage, it was crucial that she relied on him more for news of the outside world, especially with her new change of circumstance. The living quarters had a small library complete with comfortable seating and an area for socialization. It had a large stock of food stuffs and a small fire with a vent that led to the outside (he had hidden it so that no one became suspicious of sudden smoke when no one was home). There was even a box for food that was chilled with a cold enchantment placed on it. There was a chamber pot and tub, both in separate rooms and the one with the pot had a small contraption that allowed it to be taken up into the main house and emptied so that the stink didn’t linger. He had also had a small well created for fresh water.

Finally, there were two closed off rooms. First, Hannibal led Abigail to her room. It was small and homey. The trappings were expensive, but deceptively simple to suit her taste. It had frustrated him to do so, which left him slightly irritated and hoping she was grateful. Then, he led her to the next room.

“Not don’t be too surprised and be careful not to upset her. She has been without company for longer than you and I wouldn’t want her to be too startled by your presence.”

Abigail perked up curiously upon hearing ‘her’. If only she knew exactly how much he was hiding. So, Hannibal opened the door, pleased to see the shocked and joyful expression that spread across her face. There was a bed inside with a figure perched on it. The young woman shifted and stared at Abigail, tears slipping down her face.

Abigail took one cautious step forward, then another, barely restraining herself from leaping forward, damn the consequences. “Georgia?”

Hannibal left the two girls alone in their reunion. It was important that they bond together before he enacted his plan in the future. It wasn’t complete solid at the moment, and he also had Miriam Lass tucked away for when she became necessary. It was more important that Miriam stayed isolated as she couldn’t be allowed even a slight memory of her circumstances. It would cause issues later. Georgia could be bribed with Abigail’s safety, and she hadn’t been with him long enough that he couldn’t accomplish a quick fix with her. That would be all she would need; once Georgia was released back into the wild, her Tranquility was inevitable. That would tamper any memories she had enough that a more strenuous treatment wouldn’t be necessary.

The day only got better. Shortly after he went back upstairs, a courier approached him. Lady Crawford had departed from his company immediately after they were in walking distance to Verchiel. He had presented a horse to her so that she wouldn’t think badly of him. The messenger told him that Lady Crawford had requested an audience at his estate for dinner. He readily agreed and began whipping something up posthaste.

When she arrived, Hannibal had to help her across the threshold, her legs as weak as a foal. She smiled pleasantly at him and a small twinge of pleasure rang through him. He had a delightful suspicion about what they Lady Crawford had done. “Would you mind helping me to my seat?” she asked and his reply was easy.

“Of course, your Ladyship.”

She laughed, and Hannibal escorted her to her chair at the dining table. It was complex fare, a dish from Rivain that employed sweetbreads, which was unusual for their type of food. Most Rivaini meals were seafood based, but that had never stopped him before. Her smile was weak as she picked at her food. Normally, he would find it rude, but these were special circumstances.

“It’s disconcert, not being able to walk across a room.”

He nodded sagely. “Nothing can be unnerving to someone strong as being weak.”

The expression on her face spoke of someone that walked a thousand miles and was finally allowed to have some rest. “The first time I visited our healer was the most strenuous. There was so much magic being pushed through my body, fighting with the disease. After, he gave me more mundane cures for me to use at home, but I’ll never forget that first time.” A small chuckled eased its way past lazing lips. “It was the second time he carried me across the threshold.” She paused, collecting her thoughts. “I had a specific reason for this visit, but felt compelled to come under the guise of a meal. I apologize if I pick at the food, but my original

request was meant to allow me to show my gratitude." Her smile transformed into something bitter.

"Gratitude?" he prodded.

She nodded, and pulled token from her bag beside her. Originally, she had excused it as something to carry her medicinal herbs, but it was far too bulky for it to be just that. It was a bottle of wine, the label something he immediately recognized. "I apologize if it is inadequate, but I was unable to acquire Legacy White Shear. It's Golden Scythe 4:90 Black."

He took it from her. "This is a very distinguished gift, but may I ask whatever for."

Her smile faded from her face. It was not from sorrow, but because the muscles there were too weak to hold it up any longer. "You showed me that death was not something to fear, but an inevitable end to one part of my journey. It is not a defeat and I am not weak for wishing for it. With this, I can truly feel that I have no regrets. All of my unfinished business it done."

"Bella, what did you do?"

"Did you know that enough of a cure is poison for your body? They say the best poisons come from medicine? I just made sure that I got enough."

"Jack is far away. You are denying him a goodbye."

She began shaking her head, her neck unable to allow it to do it with any sort of control. Her skull lulled back and forth with her attempt. "No. No. I didn't want to die with him able to find my body. I didn't want him to have to see me or be forced to stay there, waiting for my body to become a ceremonial object apart form him, separate from who I was, someone who he can only hold in his mind." Tears were shed from her eyes, lids unable to staunch the flow. "What goodbye have I really denied him? It would have been painful for him and for I. I allowed myself a peaceful one, one that would not traumatize him." Hannibal saw a few inherent flaws in her argument, but decided not to push it. "Will you tell Jack that I love him very much?"

"Yes," he agreed.

While she was unable to smile, Bella's joy was clear in her voice. "Goodbye, Comte Lecter." Her eyes closed and her dropped back on her neck, body only held upright by the back of the chair. He waited there for a few moments, deciding on which call to make.

"Goodbye Bella," he said to silent room, nearly devoid of life. He glanced around before a servant walked in, carrying the dessert course. There was really no avoiding it now.

He barked slightly, "Get a healer!" They scurried off. Hannibal looked back to the body across from him, slowly making its way toward being a corpse. It would all depend now of if his servant made it back in time with a healer. Once the soul departed from the body, there would be no going back.

He was intrigued to see what would happen now, and especially what Jack would do once he learned of Bella's attempt to end her own life.

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The first person that Jack entrusted with his knowledge of Cole was naturally Alana. Brian and Jimmy may have been with him longer, but both of them were notoriously set in their opinions. They also understood his situation with Bella both more and less than Alana did. They had seen the effect it had on him, but not what Bella was going through. She had been more withdrawn since their arrival in Val Royeaux and in the short time before her departure. He was unsure whether they would see the complexities that Jack was dealing with. Alana on the other hand had seen the effects on both of them, but did not know of the history of the situation. It was something he had not felt comfortable sharing.

His thoughts often lingered on his wife, but they had covered there more lately. A letter should have been given to him by now informing him of her safe arrival at their new estate, gifted by the Empress. She said estate, but the description made it sound smaller comparatively and much more homey. Each day that passed by without news crawled into his gut and made his innards roil.

It was an affair like this that Jack wished Beverly or Will was around for. He dampened the thought. The Seeker had not spoken with Will about private matters for some time, especially after the first few months of Bella being diagnosed and with the way their relationship was now (and Will's position), there was no way that it was going to happen again.

What had affected Alana most of all was the knowledge that Cole had approached Will. "You don't think-?" she started and Jack didn't let her finish.

"I have no doubt that Will felt that way at some point," Jack informed her. "His situation did seem hopeless for a while and we didn't exactly make it easy. What matters is that he told Cole not to."

They both paused and took a deep breath. Jack wondered at how Will and Beverly were doing now. It was very likely that Jack wouldn't see him for another month or so while his situation with the Lord Seeker was still tenuous. He hadn't been given any information about his status. Meanwhile, the two of them were alone in Chilton's fortress forced to worry about those loyal to or being trained by the High Seeker. There were several worrying conclusions that Jack was drawing, especially since he didn't understand where their relationship was at the moment. Chilton's eyes held greed before they left. Will hadn't exactly done anything willingly, and he didn't deserve to be left alone with the man.

There was nothing Jack could do about it now.

Then, a messenger bird flew towards them at a breakneck speed. Jack was quick to intercept it, and, to his shock, the message seemed to be meant for him. He double checked the tag on it and ripped it open when he saw that it was from Comte Hannibal Lecter. The contents seared his soul from the inside, burning him. His hands clutched the letter tight, and he turned on heel and left. Alana was following behind him, yelling for him to explain what was going on.

Jack ignored her. He was going to the Lord Seeker and demand that he be allowed to leave. Bella had just attempted suicide, and he needed to be in Verchiel with her.

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Will glanced over at Beverly, already tired of the shackles that kept him in his chair. This was the third session that he had been forced to experience with the High Seeker and so far nothing had achieved any form of success. Beverly had been to all of them to make sure that nothing untoward happened and no one tried to plant anything in his brain. The previous two sessions were extremely boring, just heaps of questions thrown at him that he answered half-honestly. The lies he told were minuscule and only were ever used when the actual answer was extremely private. Logically, Will was aware that it was slightly contrary to their agreement, but it's not like Chilton could tell.

Chilton had informed him that he would be starting to take drugs today, specifically one developed by certain groups (Will assumed Ben-Hassrath). The High Seeker explained that what he had been given was designed to bring out his unconscious mind and prod it into being honest with the man. The purpose of its use on Will would be to understand how his mind worked and perhaps bring to light any details on the copy murders that may have been missed and resolve any missing evidence. Considering the fact that there was a lot about that period that Will didn't even know, he was just as eager to learn anything about it. It was regrettable that it had to happen thanks to Frederick; the elf didn't want to be indebted to this human. Luckily, Beverly was by his side through this. It was nice to have his own idiot deterrent.

"Here you are," Frederick said as he passed the drink to Will. It was mixed into a thick tea, dark and sludgy. He quickly tilted it back and gulped it down, the sliminess swished around mouth, and he had to fight so that he didn't spit it back out. The taste was awful.

Immediately the world got a bit murky, vertigo jerking it around and around. Fixing his eyes on the wall across from him, his brain struggled to contain his tongue, thoughts spill across it. He hummed. "Could this stuff cause memory loss?"

Tapping steps began shuffling around him, a gentle hand patting his head to ground him. He wanted it to scratch his scalp and soothe the itch that was growing. "It could certainly help, I suppose. It would be better used as something to aid the proper catalyst. It seems strange to say, but the traumatic, whether with actual experiences or physical injury, can force someone to forget. The brain either cannot heal enough to keep the memories, or something incredibly horrible requires the mind to protect itself by forgetting the event."

"Does Comte Lecter know this?" Will slurred, and Beverly scoffed behind him.

Frederick hesitated and Will could feel his stare. "He did mention it once when we were discussing Ben-Hassrath techniques."

"So he does possess the knowledge." Will rolled his head towards Chi;ton. "I wonder why it came up." The vertigo came back and he had to keep from vomiting. "Ugh. When does the world stop spinning?" He blinked and the world was gone.

Everything came back in soft images, light and color staining the shadows. Pigments blended together in a parody of an afterimage, a painting that bled around the edges and smudged the lines. Something flashed and it was Hannibal. He was holding a small stone that appeared to be made of crystal upon inspection. It was quickly brightening and dimming, the light making it difficult to discern the details of the room and of his Lordship across from him.

Holding a cup up to Will's lips, Hannibal combed sweaty hair back and held his head to keep him from collapsing back into the chair he was seated in. "It's alright Will," whispered a voice behind his head. That wasn't right! Hannibal was in front of him, not behind him.

"You asked me if Hannibal would have that kind of knowledge. Did Comte Lecter ever administer some form of drug therapy to you?"

"Yes," Will hissed. "There is something. I-I don't know what it is. I wasn't supposed to know. I remember a light flashing. It's so disorienting."

"Don't worry," Hannibal comforted his burning brain. "The light is meant to stimulate your mind, and make your senses crash together. I'll make sure that it doesn't have any lasting damage." The light wouldn't stop and Will tried to lift a hand to put it away. His Lordship simply smiled and pushed his hand back down, what expression was on his face was reminiscent of a parent indulging their child. "No, no. It's important that it does its work uninterrupted. The dissonance might foster a change in your mind and help you see your true self."

Before his very eyes, Hannibal face began to change. Half of it melted off, sinking down his chin until it was running down his neck. Shaking, Will tried to push the man off of him, to get free of this nightmare. Hannibal smiled. It had too many teeth. "Is something wrong?"

"Will?" a voice called to him and he opened his eyes again.

Hannibal was standing above him, but then the face transformed into two. The two faces became distinct, a man and a woman, both appearing human. The elf tried to push himself away, but his arms and legs were bound to the chair he was in, preventing him from moving. "Will?" called one of the faces and he recognized the voice, but he couldn't think of where it was from. Slowly, extremely slowly, the shapes gained detail and he could finally knew the faces above him: Beverly and Frederick.

Will was heaving- he hadn't even realized he was doing it- and his body was half-sunk in the chair, straining against his restraints. "He was-he was doing it on purpose." Wide eyes turned to Beverly. "He was creating the blackouts, the lost time. It was strategic, planned." His friend's expression changed from concern to horror. Chilton looked to her shocked, "What is he saying? What does that mean?"

Beverly turned to Chilton and explained for him, "You know about the fact that he lost time, that's why they suspected possession, but with this-" She gestured to Will. "This means that Comte Lecter was behind the blackouts and that he was doing it on purpose to Will, his own charge."

Chilton slowly turned his head to Will, his look filled with dawning terror and dread. “That is highly unethical.”

“Highly is an understatement,” Will repeated.

“It also suggests the need to have a serious conversation with Comte Lecter.”

“No!” Beverly and WIll protested. Beverly stepped in for him when he glanced at her in confusion. “Going to him might cause more issues down the line. He can’t suspect that we know anything.”

“And what exactly do we know?” Chilton gestured to Will, who was just then gaining control of his limbs again. “This isn’t exactly evidence.”

Will took a deep breath through his nose and straightened in his chair. “It’s not, but it can get us some.”

Frederick looked at them both dubiously and let the Templars know that they needed to take him back to his cell. Will had a sinking suspicion that the man would be a problem later.

Will couldn’t remember how he got here. One moment, he was attempting to find sleep in the lackluster comfort of his cell. The new place prevented him from getting adequate rest, so he found himself concentrating on his surroundings, specifically a drop of sweat that was travelling down his face. The next, he was back in his shack, staring at Comte Hannibal Lecter, while next to him was Garrett Hobbs, smile decaying into his face. Echoing in the back of his mind were the sounds coming from his Hounds, clearly put where they could not disturb this meeting.

As if to add another strange bit of confusion, Will was then outside of himself looking in. The scene was taking place just on the other side of the bars of his cell, the hinges loose and the whole thing slightly parted. He pushed his hand against the thick bit of metal that served a handle and it swung forward silently. A quick glance around revealed that this was indeed in his shack and the Garrett Hobbs he thought he saw was in fact Abel Gideon, sitting very confused on one of the old chairs.

The Will before him put one palm out, each finger stretching and almost bending unnaturally from the strain. Other Will swallowed and tried to gather himself. “What is he doing here?”

Both men shifted and Hannibal tilted his head slightly, face carefully impassive. “What is who doing here?”

“I- How did I get here? Why is he here?” Other Will pointed to Gideon and Will strode around him before focusing on Hannibal. The noble was between Other Will and the doorway before he glided around the scene and standing at Will’s side.

“Creators I feel like I’m losing it! Everything is just slipping away and it only makes sense with everything that’s happened. Of course he would be here!” Other Will cried and began to shake uncontrollably.

“Who, Will?”

Tears crept in at the corner of his eyes, the stress too much on his body that he couldn’t staunch their flow. “Garrett Hobbs.”

The scene continued and Will felt dread and hatred pooling in his stomach.

“Your name is Will. You are in your home in the Alienage, late in the evening-”

“Stop! I know who I am! I know where I am! I don’t care; I want to know…Is he real? I can see him, but is he there?”

“Will,” Hannibal seemed to hesitate, but Will now knew who this man actually was and what he was doing. He looked over to where Will was pointing, but just off. It was enough to put doubt into other Will’s clouded mind. “I don’t see anyone.”

Before him, Other Will broke down and Will watched his own deterioration. Hannibal’s impassive face as this torture took place only made his disgust at the noble grow. It was growing larger and larger as Other Will, Old Will’s world crumbled. Then, Old Will let go of his magic and the sheer trauma of the events that took place had him collapse. Hannibal turned to the other man in the room. “Was that completely necessary?”

Gideon merely shrugged. “He was going to attack me and potentially you. I don’t see you being bothered by it.”

“It caused mild damage at best. A little rest and he’ll be right as rain.” The words sounded so strange coming out of the nobleman’s mouth, almost like he was mocking Gideon. Hannibal took a different chair and impassively studied the other man before him. “Are you the man who claimed to be the Highwayman?”

Abel seemed confused. “Why do you say claimed?”

Hannibal betrayed nothing as he answered, “Because you are not. You know that and that’s all that is true to you, even when you don’t know much more about who you are beyond it.” His head turned to look directly at Will and a slow sense of satisfaction radiated out from the man. “It is a terrible thing, to have your identity taken from you.”

Will opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. A terrible thing indeed.

The next day, Will told Beverly everything. He knew as soon as he finished recounting his dream that she didn’t know if she could believe him. Her thoughts sat just on the edge of doubt, which was enough to keep her from jumping in beside him. That didn’t stop her attempts at support, which he appreciated. “Just because Hannibal was hurting you doesn’t make him the Highwayman or the Copy Killer.”

“It does line up with actions that the Copy Killer would have taken!” Will pointed out.

She replied slowly, “It does, but no one will listen if we say: Will had a dream and in it Comte Hannibal Lecter manipulated him and met Abel Gideon, then lied about it later. The only person with an inkling besides ourselves is Chilton and I doubt he’s going to help. Who is going to believe the two of us against a noble?”

“You’re a Seeker.”

Her response accompanied a reluctant nod, “I am, but sadly that doesn’t mean much to the upper crusts in Orlais. They see power one side and then they see you, an elven apostate and potential maleficar, and me, a younger Seeker that was known to be friends with you and rumored to be half-elven, on the other and they will laugh. We’re nothing to them. I can’t bring this up until I can back it up.” She sat back in her chair and sighed, breath puffing up to the ceiling. They sat for a minute, basking in the silence they were allowed. Then, she straightened and sat up, boring holes into his skull. “The last time you mentioned the Highwayman, you specifically pointed out that he was taking organs. Furthermore, you linked that when I found that our previous killer’s organs were missing. What does he do with them? If we find the organs, we can use them as evidence.”

Will tried to dive into Hannibal’s mind. It wasn’t the same when he wasn’t dreaming, and his limited abilities did not allow him to share memories with the Comte either. They had nothing to link the spirits together and they weren’t in the location where the event took place. Luckily, the dreamer had spent so much time trying to understand the copy killer and the Highwayman that he almost knew their thought processes by heart. Now that Will knew they were the same person and that the person was likely Comte Hannibal Lecter, missing pieces that he hadn’t noticed before came together.

His brain brought him back to that very first day they were alone together and Hannibal had brought him a beautiful gourmet meal. It had been the day after Cassandra Boyle had been found dead, during the Garrett Hobbs case. Even with her body, Will had the feeling of something sinister approaching and he had still gotten a single similarity from reading off of her body that had coincided with Hobbs’. “He’s eating them,” Will whispered.

Beverly did not speak, the gears in her mind where processing what she just learned about a person they both knew. Then: “He couldn’t have eaten our last killer.”

“What are you talking about?” Will demanded and she shut him up in excitement. “You don’t understand, the killer was Blighted. If he ate her organ, he would be tainted as well. The corruption would get into his blood stream and he would have been tainted. He would have still taken them; we didn’t find them ditched anywhere.”

“He didn’t,” Will surmised. “If he had, we would have noticed by now and he’s too smart for that.”

She smiled. “He’ll still have them.”

Will shrugged, “He’s whimsical like that.” Beverly didn’t say anything in return and once Will saw the expression on her face, his own amusement turned to despair. “Beverly?” Will asked, afraid of the answer. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that Blighted organs would be extremely obvious and difficult to dispose of without infecting the area around it. You may not know, but he’s been going in and out of his house a lot lately, busy with Bella.” Will had heard that she was staying with Comte Lecter; her illness must have been getting worse if she was willing to be cared for by anyone. “I can sneak in among the servants and maybe take a peek inside, see if i can find anything.”

“No! Beverly, don’t!” She halted him before he could say anything more.

“Look! I haven’t been there for you. I stood by and allowed you, my best friend, to have these things done to you. For so long, I didn’t believe in your innocence and you deserved much more than just my belief.” Beverly drew closer to the bars separating his part of the room from hers and grimaced. “He’s been asking around lately and I think Chilton might break soon. He followed you from Red Crossing, from Halamshiral, from Val Royeaux, and doesn’t seem to care what it does to his reputation. He’s obsessed, Will, and I worry what will happen if this continues.” She reached out to him and he took her arms. There was an attempt at a hug through the bars and no one was there to stop them. Finally, his best friend believed him, but she was about to do something unbelievably stupid.

“Don’t go!” he whispered. “I need your help here. There will be another way to catch him.”

She shook her head and let go of him. “I’m sorry Will, but I need to do this. I’m going to get evidence and I’m going to get you out of here.”

The door closed behind her leaving him silent and alone. He wanted her to come back and was afraid of what would happen if she followed through on her plan. Who was Will kidding? Once Beverly set her mind to something, she didn’t back down. Just this once though… Just this once he wished that she would. Will wanted to be out as much as she wanted him to, but not at the cost of a friend.

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Beverly found it disturbingly easy to infiltrate Comte Lecter’s household. It put a slight bust in her thoughts on him being a serial killer; wouldn’t security be a bit tighter? Then again, perhaps he was just arrogant enough that he thought guards were unnecessary.

What she didn’t know was that the servants were loyal to Hannibal and had most definitely noticed her presence. The man had been occupied taking care of Lady Crawford as his guest and monitoring her health, but a servant informed him of the intruder with enough brains to disguise herself. Most households probably wouldn’t have noticed, but his were used to being vigilant.

Carefully, Beverly moved through the house and for a long period of time she found nothing. It took hours of her careful monitoring and it was evening before anything exciting happened. Movement came from the upper floors, so she flitted through the halls until her foot strayed across something. The rogue took a few steps back and moved forward again. The floor boards under her feet had a bit of give in one area and her steps sounded strangely hollow. Crouching, Beverly inspected the floorboards and came across a very subtle line. The Comte had been very careful not to just set a rug over it, but to cleverly disguise it by using decoration to draw the eye elsewhere.

She glanced around; it was dark, so the household had been dwindling in the last hour or so. If she was going to make a move, it had to be now. Otherwise, someone would come looking or would notice that she wasn't supposed to be there. The longest part of getting through the trapdoor was picking the lock. It was actually sophisticated, which only planted more in her mind that Comte Hannibal Lecter was hiding something. Her anxiety only made it more difficult, as she felt the sinking suspicion that any moment she would be discovered.

The lock clicked and she rushed to get down into the darkness.

It wasn't as dark as she thought it would be though. Torches lit up the walls and led to a significant and secure living space. It was cozy enough that one or two people (maybe even three) could stay there long term. It was a strange thing to be hiding under an estate. Movement came from one corner of the room and Beverly whirled around to face the other person. Into the light stepped Abigail Hobbs.

She gasped. "Maker's breath! Abigail what are you doing down he-" A hand jerked over her mouth and snapped her head back. The rough handling had her facing the trap door, which was wide open, and she was able to see that her attacker was Hannibal Lecter.

"Go to your room," he ordered Abigail, and Beverly fought his grip. The weight of his hand was crushing against her windpipe and she felt herself collapsing against his hold. "Go to your room," he ordered a second time and the Seeker strained to hear the footsteps walking away against the pounding of blood in her ears. Desperately, she clawed his arms and reached up, aiming for his eyes or at least to get him to twinge away and loosen his choking. It didn't work.

Blackness crept in on the edges of her vision and she could faintly here, "Breaking and entering. Very rude, Seeker Katz."

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Jack's arrival in Verchiel was tumultuous and that was putting it mildly. The trip would have normally taken roughly three weeks, but he rushed to have it completed. He managed to arrive at the chateau owned by Comte Lecter in roughly a week and a half. The horse he had been on was half dead and he asked that the best care be given to her. The rest of the squad were perhaps another week behind him, all just as eager to get away from Val Royeaux, but the varying horsemanship meant they couldn't afford to attempt to keep up with him. He wasn't going to slow down on seeing his almost dead wife for the rest of them, and they all understood.

In the letters they had been exchanging, Hannibal detailed the fact that once Bella had attempted to take her own life in his presence, Hannibal felt it was his responsibility to care for her in his absence. He had his servants and healers looking over her and spending time in her company each day to ease some of the monotony. Jack wasn't sure what he would find when he arrived, but he hoped Bella would be well-cared for and aware enough for them to have a proper reunion.

The room she was in was exactly what he would have hoped for. It was a mild, yet royal blue with a view to the outside and the beautiful forest that stretched out and was only interrupted

by the Bastion's ridiculous towers. He knelt down by the bed and put his forehead to hers, willing her to awake. Jack felt her grin against his face and place a gently kiss there. Bella was alive and he was there with her. That was all that mattered.

The door opened and closed behind him and Bella sat up. Hannibal had joined them. "Why are you here?" Bella demanded. While he had interrupted a private moment, this was his house. Jack didn't understand why Bella was reacting the way that she did.

He bowed his head. "You would not listen to my apologies at any other time, but I thought it was necessary for me to do so. I couldn't honor what you asked of me, not when I know the both of you so well. I don't believe you will forgive me, but I ask you to try."

"I don't," she said harshly.

"I am sorry."

"Get out!" she growled, but the Comte did not back away. So, Bella reached out and slapped Hannibal before Jack could stop her. "I said get out!" Hannibal had not made a sound.

"Bella," Jack tried to warn, but the nobleman waved him off.

"She has a right to be angry." Clearly there was more to the story than simply 'Bella tried to kill herself'. Jack glanced at his wife out of the corner of his eye and politely dismissed whatever was brewing in his own head. "I'll take my leave," Hannibal offered and walked out of the room, leaving the couple alone. Bella had a lot she needed to say before they could even begin to work past this.

The next morning felt like it was going to precede a funeral. Death hung in the air, an executioner's ax hovering over his head. Jack sat at the table of Comte Hannibal Lecter, the man bustling around and serving him breakfast. His Lordship had informed Jack that he sent the servants home for the day, hoping to give the Seeker his privacy in his time of grief. The food served was a spread of different seafood-based dishes, all with varying styles of cooking ranging from Rivaini to Antivan (and even some Starkhaven dishes as well). Cheeses and jellies were there for variety with a dark bread that Jack didn't recognize. All in all, it was Hannibal trying to provide him comfort food, even when the man could cook nothing but his fanciest dishes. He appreciated the attempt.

Picking at the food, the Seeker stared at the chair where Bella might have sat, the night that it happened. Hannibal hadn't told him which one she had almost died in, but he could imagine it, hold the image in his mind. Bella was the type of person that wanted to sit across from the person she was talking to. She always wanted to look her conversation partner in the eye, especially when the moment would create a sense of vulnerability. That's how she would have wanted to die as well: staring death straight in the eyes. Hannibal would have had to do.

"You have to eat something, Jack. You've been up all night." He had been. Leaving her room felt like a travesty with her so despondent, a prisoner in her own bed. Fear crept into his soul, making him believe that if he glanced away for just a moment, when he looked back she would be dead.

He spoke. “She knew that she would die to wasting, so she wanted to die on her own terms rather than surrender. Bella was losing the war, but wanted to deny her illness a victory.”

A hand placed itself on his shoulder and Jack had to fight to keep from shrugging it off. He didn’t want someone to try and comfort him right now. All he could do was think back to the conversation he had with her a couple of nights before she left. It should have been a sign. He should have done something.

Hannibal tried anyway. “Bella is stubborn; she is going to win, no matter what she has to do. What is important now, is helping her change her goals. You need to hope she finds more reasons to live than not to and support her through it.”

Cole crossed his mind, the young man that killed people because they asked him to. The passion moved him, now that he saw someone close to him feeling similarly. “I can’t blame her for wanting to control how and when she dies.”

The Comte seated himself at his side, carefully adjusting the food on his own plate. “It was her choice, and I do believe that killing someone that can no longer function at an acceptable level can be a mercy.”

“She wanted you to let her die.” Jack slid the tines in his fork through a tender piece of fish, watching the juice ooze, entranced by the blood he imagined there. “I’m grateful that you didn’t.”

“I couldn’t,” Hannibal replied. “While there are many paths I could have taken, my attachment to the both of you only granted me one. Despite my own opinions, I couldn’t do that to you. Unfortunately, it broke her trust in me.”

The Seeker smiled, turning his sight away from the fish to look up at the man who saved his wife. “You may have felt like you broke her trust in you, but you’ve gained mine. You’re a good friend, Hannibal.” He popped the bite in his mouth and sighed. “My wife is alive, and I still feel like I’m mourning a loss. There’s numbness where relief should be. I can’t help but wonder if she’ll try again. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

The response wasn’t relieving. Shocking.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal scene 1: Bella and Hannibal discuss death/her wasting away and her going to Verchiel without Jack. Hannibal requests to go with her.
Jack scene 1.5: Jack is distressed about his separation from Bella and how long it will be, so he plans to throw himself into work. As Will is being transported, Jack is distracted by the dropped clay Mabari figurine. The convoy transporting Will leaves before he can say goodbye, but he hears a noise and finds a dead body. Jack's sense of

duty and lack of direction does not allow him to leave the murder unsolved. Later, Jack finds more deaths like it that indicate someone was able to be where they shouldn't have been. The lack of possibility for the deaths and Bella's absence drives him to obsession, which concerns Brian and Jimmy. However, once he explains the mystery, they find themselves absorbed as well.
Jack scene 2: Jack finds out about Kade's cover up and is outraged. When he returns to his office, the killer (Cole) is waiting for him. They have a discussion about Cole's motives and that Cole has met Will. As soon as Cole leaves, Jack forgets about the encounter. However, he did take the opportunity to write a few things down first. Jack continues to dwell on the mysterious writing and what it might have meant, but his memories return after the Mabari figurine triggers them returning.
Hannibal scene 2: Hannibal and Abigail arrive in Verchiel shortly after Will. Hannibal shows Abigail her new living space and enacts his next part of the plan to bind her to him, in the form of the still alive Georgia Madchen. Later, he has dinner with Bella and she nearly dies in front of him, only saved by the timely interruption of a servant.
Jack scene 3: Jack receives news about what happened to Bella while training Alana and telling her about Cole.
Jack scene 4: Jack arrives in Verchiel and visits Bella and Hannibal in the aftermath. Bella is not happy with Hannibal and tells him to get out in his own home. The next morning, Jack has breakfast with Hannibal and they think on their friendship and what might come next. Jack doesn't get the support he wants

Mien'harel

Chapter Summary

"In that story of yours—the fisherman watching the stars, dying alone—you thought he gave up right? But he went on living. He lost everyone, but he still got up every morning. He made a life, even if it was alone. That's the world. Everything you build, it tears down. Everything you've got, it takes—and it's gone Forever. The only choices you get are to lie down and die or keep going. He kept going. That's as close to beating the world as anyone gets." - Varric Tethras, Dragon Age: Inquisition

Alternatively:
"Maybe we could try and fix this without murdering anyone?"
"Oh Josie! It's so cute how you think that murder isn't the solution to all life's problems."
-Josephine Montilyet and Leliana, Dragon Age: Inquisition

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Mien'harel: Rebellion, an outcry against injustice

This chapter is an entire drop late. I'm actually working on trying to get two chapters done during this next period to make up for it; we'll see how it goes. Sorry about the delay, I've started working again AND this is probably the longest chapter I've written so far (at over 23000 words). It's been a bit crazy, and some parts I had to fight to finish. On the plus side, I was a lot more careful with editing. Hopefully, you guys enjoy.

Also: I'm going to catch up here and then I'm probably going to go back and re-edit Vir Assan. It's mostly going to be minor changes (titles, some info, descriptions, etc.), so you guys should be okay. I've been re-playing the games when Writer's Block is striking heavily to get myself in the mood to write more and have been listening to the audiobooks at work. It will change absolutely nothing about the plot, dialogue, etc. What it will do is just get a few things in order and double check my grammar (so on and so forth); I was extremely disappointed when I went back and checked my last chapter. I will also check for inconsistencies and other things. If there's anything you guys have noticed, please let me know. I'm trying to keep that in mind while I write and am rejuvenating my character and plot notes document.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal smiled pleasantly as High Seeker Frederick Chilton smirked at him. Jack had agreed to his suggestion that Hannibal should accompany him to the Bastion d'Argent so that they could discuss Bella's care at the new Lecter estate. In addition, Hannibal was happy to transport Jack to the Bastion where he would probably settle a few affairs and wait for the rest of his team to arrive. It gave him a quick chance to check in on Will, an opportunity Jack was only too happy to grant. From what little he gathered, Jack had his own business with the elven mage.

Of course, things were never that simple. As soon as Hannibal strolled in, he was stopped by the High Seeker. "Comte Lecter! To what do we owe a visit from one as esteemed as yourself." Hannibal did not even get a chance to reply before he was interrupted by Chilton's prattling. "As such, I do regret to inform you that we are not to allow civilians into the Bastion d'Argent by order of the Lord Seeker. My sincerest apologies."

"You regret to inform me?" Hannibal murmured, absolutely meaning to be heard.

Chilton beamed. "Yes. It is rather unfortunate that the Empress cannot speak on your behalf, but in the absence of others' ability to politick around the situation, we mean for Chantry matters to be kept in the Chantry. This is for your safety, and I recommend you do not try to circumvent it."

Hannibal was extremely annoyed, but his face did not move a muscle. The longer that he stayed staring at the High Seeker with an utterly blank expression, the more it seemed to unsettle the object of his glare. He was somewhat soothed by the gradual deflation of the other man's ego that took place. It was at this moment that Jack Crawford walked in, having taken care of all of what he needed to outside of the entrance. The larger man stopped, eyeing the two of them warily. "May I ask what is going on?"

"The Lord Seeker informed me that non-Seekers are not to be allowed into the Bastion," informed Chilton and Jack scoffed.

"At the moment, Comte Hannibal Lecter is considered my provisional guest." He turned to Chiton with a sour look. "I understand that you feel the nobles should have no power over the Chantry, but this is me extending my goodwill to the Empress's representative. I suggest you give her no reason to start poking into Seeker business." Hannibal made sure to shoot Jack a grateful expression for giving him the perfect excuse to come and go as much as he'd liked. Hannibal really had no intention of telling the Empress anything, but neither of the Seekers in front of him needed to know that. "If you'll excuse me," Jack stated. "I will be seeing Will now."

"I'll have his guards escort you," Frederick muttered, fairly put out by the turn of the events. His bravado had completely disappeared now that he had been outplayed. He glared at Hannibal, shockingly open with his demeanor. "Will is in a delicate place. I do not wish to confuse him any more than he already is."

Hannibal echoed his own thoughts when he asked, "Confuse him? I thought your opinion was that he was conscious and aware of all of his actions."

“It was, but my opinion is shifting. After several interviews using chemicals to examine his responses, certain information came to light.”

Certain information. Will had been very busy apparently. Now, it was more important than ever for him to pay the young man a visit. He needed to gauge what exactly Will thought that he knew. “What sort of information?”

“We did find some phenomena that were naturally occuring,” Chilton replied, probably saying more than he needed to, but it wasn’t like Hannibal was going to inform him of the misstep. “There were others, however, that appear to have been induced if not outright manufactured.” He smirked and that’s when Hannibal knew. While Chilton was a nuisance overall and a terrible player of the Game, he could potentially be a tool in Will’s favor. He had to go.

So, he did what he did best. He obfuscated. “You’re suggesting that someone was playing with his mind intentionally? I thought that was obvious considering that a demon was affecting it.”

“I was thinking of someone a little more physical and corporeal.” Chilton eyed him. “We talked so much together about the Ben-Hassrath techniques and the lengths the Qunari could and would go to so their people remained compliant. You showed great knowledge on the subject, but said little to nothing about your own research and experience with it.”

“I had little to say.”

Frederick tilted his head, looking awfully like a child that was considering whether or not to stick their hand in a fire. It showed a distinct lack of awareness of danger the action could pose. “Of course, to know with any certainty that you were manipulating Will’s memories, I’d need to understand how and why, especially if it drove him to kill.”

A stronger move than any the man had previously made, but still flawed and easily countered. He was careful not to directly accuse Hannibal, for which the Comte gave the High Seeker some credit. Hannibal only smiled enigmatically. “You would, wouldn’t you?” He spoke no more of it and the High Seeker stomped off when he realized that his Lordship was going to say nothing.

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Gruel.

Honestly, if Will wasn’t so positive that Hannibal’s meals contained humans for protein, he might have requested the noble fix him something more palatable. As it was, human flesh was starting to look better than the grey goop that was being served to him that was promised to give him all of his nutrients. Chilton dangled the whole thing over his head. The High Seeker kept repeating that his cooperation would grant him many privileges, including better food, but Will had been cooperating and actual food had been his first request. Will wasn’t sure if the man had been bluffing or if he just couldn’t find a cook. If the latter was the case, the elf pitied the Seekers under Frederick’s charge.

He was sucking some of it off of the rim of the bowl when his first visitor of the day came in. It wasn't settling well on his stomach, Beverly had left the Bastion the day before yesterday and had yet to come back to him. It wasn't the first or the last time that they hadn't spoken in several days, but the circumstances surrounding their last conversation left anxiety roiling inside. It plunged deeper when Jack Crawford walked into the room. The door thudded behind him, leaving the two of them alone in the cell and ripe for the first discussion they would have had in weeks.

"Will," the other man greeted, his shoulders slumped in a defeated position as soon as the door was secure. His tone betrayed everything that his posture didn't. A lot had happened since the two of them saw each other last. "I know about Cole."

That… halted any thoughts that Will was preparing. There were so many ways that this conversation could have started, but Cole hadn't even been factored into even the outliers. "Cole?" he asked.

Jack sighed and reached into the pouch at his side. From it, he pulled out a small Mabari figurine, crudely made but the subject was still obvious. "He wanted me to make sure that you didn't forget him."

"I haven't," Will quickly responded and held himself back from reaching for the clay figure. "Why haven't you?"

"I'm just that stubborn." Somehow, that seemed like the most believable explanation that the Seeker could give. "Will. Why didn't you tell us about him?"

Will's brow furrowed, perplexed by the question. Yes, Cole had asked him if he had wanted to die and it had been concerning, but turning him into the Templars didn't really cross his mind. "Because no one would believe me and I didn't see reason to?" he asked more than answered.

"You didn't see a reason to tell us about a murderer, particularly one with his specific skill set?" Jack spilled out, sounding more exhausted than angry (although Will could see the reason why he would be).

"A murderer? He offered…" Will stopped and glanced quickly up at Jack's face. The man's eyes had widened and their gazes bored into each other.

"He offered?" Jack murmured.

"I didn't think he was a murderer," Will declared and was going to stick to it.

"He offered to kill you, didn't he?" the Seeker asked, weariness pouring out from the sweat on his skin, gleaming even in the dark of the dungeon.

"I-." He interrupted himself. It wasn't like he could deny it; that's exactly what Cole had done. However, Jack spoke of Cole like he had met the young man, probably even knew more about him than Will did. That kind of knowledge would be seen in the cracks of the Seeker's face, in his response to the truth. There was nothing that Will could say that would

incriminate him, anyway. “He did. Cole approached me a couple of times which I don’t remember, but the first time I was aware of him, he was fairly clear. I refused, but if he had approached me only a day or two earlier or later, I don’t know what I would have said. He brought me support where there hadn’t been. It was relieving to find someone that wanted to help me.”

Jack flinched and then nodded, the answer having confirmed something for him that he didn’t seem inclined to share with Will. “He mentioned Bella when we talked together. I suppose it should have been a warning, because I was called shortly after to expedite my journey to Verchiel.” He shuddered. “Bella had attempted suicide.”

Bella was a remarkable and strong woman and had been someone incredibly welcoming to Will. He had known some of her pain thanks to Jack (both through their conversations and the residual energy of their grief that dreams allowed him to see), but he wasn’t aware that it was that bad. “I’m sorry, Jack.” There wasn’t much else that he could say. “I am very fond of Bella, even if I don’t know her well. Would she be gone, she would be dearly missed.”

For a while, he and Jack just sat. Occasionally, Jack would tell him a small anecdote about the first time Bella met the Empress or one of her more entertaining diplomatic fiascos, but the tone remained somber throughout. The conversation came to an end when Jack was describing how each of the squad members met his wife. “And Beverly-” Jack started, but Will interrupted him.

“Have you seen her? She usually sees me everyday, but it’s been a few since we last spoke,” he inquired, hoping the man would say yes or give him some sort of confirmation of the other woman being alive.

Instead, he simply appeared perplexed. “I haven’t, but I did just arrive.” Will’s heart sank.

Sharp rapping drew away Jack’s attention and he shrugged apologetically. “Duty calls. I’m sorry that I have to cut this short. Besides, someone else wants to come in and see you.”

Hannibal came in shortly after Jack was drawn away, looking unbearably smug for a man with little to no expression. The obsidian mask with antlers curling back around the head that represented the Lecter name to Orlesians did well enough hiding his eyes, but Will imagined he could see the red-brown hue of them through the dark holes. If he looked hard enough, it seemed like the Comte was staring. He wondered what his Lordship was thinking about.

“I’m surprised they let you in,” Will said. “Apparently I’m being put under careful guard; no civilian contact.” He very carefully did not mention that he had asked Chilton to make sure that Hannibal was not allowed in. So much for that. One part of their deal was broken, so he would have to take him to task later for it.

“I had to insist and I had help getting in,” the noble said while his lips slashed his face in a smile. It was small, but effective. “I must ask, although it has been over a month since this conversation took place, were you lying to me, Will?”

Will felt a little wrong-footed. After the conversation with Jack, the elven man wasn’t quite ready to spar just yet. “You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“When you told me that you wanted my help.” Ah. That was what he meant. It was strange that he was bringing it up now. What brought him to go on this line of questioning.

“No.” Whatever the case may be, Hannibal’s meager trust was important right now. It confused Will that his Lordship actually seemed to have believed him; it was something to be put away for later.

“The High Seeker accused me of using Ben-Hassrath techniques during our time together.” He said it so delicately, that Will almost didn’t see the dagger coming. “He even went so far as to suggest that I drove you to kill and not a demon.”

Fuck. What the hell was Frederick thinking? Will’s only power in this place was his words and his isolation from his opponent; if Hannibal suspected that Will knew more than he let on or that he was further in complete finding the truth, a good portion of his power went away. He didn’t even deign to give the High Seeker a mental apology, it was his fault Will was in this position. “That’s not what I believe,” Will declared and hoped that it sounded sincere enough. There was enough truth that Hannibal shouldn’t feel it in his words. He didn’t believe that Hannibal drove him to kill after all. He hesitated a moment before taking a couple of cautious steps towards the bars. His Lordship was curious enough to follow his lead and Will summoned some of his general anxiety and peeked at the door around Hannibal. “He drugged me. I don’t know what it was, but he said it was to get me to tell the truth. Something was wrong. It felt hypnotic. I barely remember what was said and done, only the feeling of floating and Chilton grinning down at me.”

Hannibal looked thoughtful. “Hypnotics can alter your perception and render you easily suggestible.”

“I remembered you pouring a potion down my throat while a magelight strobed in your study, I can hear your voice murmuring to me but the words are indistinct.”

“What was happening while you were experiencing this memory?”

“The High Seeker was doing the same and he was telling me what I remembered. I could see it like a memory, like it was happening to me. Two images were overlapping and echoing one another until it was hard to tell which came first.”

“I’ve heard of similar situations while people were undergoing treatment.” Hannibal flashed a soft and somber smile, which only made Will feel disgusted; he was careful not to show the tint of his distress on his face for his Lordship to translate. “People will occasionally discover that some part of their memory as they know it is based on a falsehood.”

Will whispered, “Why is he doing this to me?”

Hannibal’s reply was so simple that Will wondered if it was the noble’s reason. “Because you don’t know what you can trust to be true, you only know what you wish to be true.” He gave a heavy sigh, Will could barely hear the theatrical notes hidden within, but they were there. “That can be taken advantage of. We both know what a painstaking process reconstructing memory can be. It’s even worse trying to fit the pieces together and construct a cohesive narrative when so many are missing.”

Will snorted. It seemed appropriate given the situation and was something he actually wanted to do. “Even the pieces I remember don’t correspond to fact anymore.” He thought of the earlier memory where he was watching himself fall apart.

“Certainty will be found with those who care about you, not those who condemned you as a psychopath.”

The prisoner mustered up a smile, “You’ve never condemned me. You’ve always been my friend.” The words tasted like poison.

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The conversation with Will had gone extremely well, all things considered. Last night, he made sure to leave a tip for Freddie Lounds about Beverly Katz’s corpse. The incident with Bella had already happened, so he knew that Jack would be coming, and had prepared accordingly. The message was for him as much as it was for Will. The Frost Runes he put in place would only hold up for so long; the runes were meant for damage in the short term. Even a rapidly cooling body would decay at some point if only part of it was actually being cooled. It was the tail end of summer, but the air was still hot and humid.

Returning home carried its own issues. Abigail had become restless as of late. The encounter with Seeker Katz had left her checking and rechecking the hatch on more than one occasion, and constantly asking him for updates on the investigation of her death. When he informed her that the body hadn’t been found yet, it only seemed to make her more distraught. He wasn’t quite sure why. There was always the chance that she was stuck in the past, reminiscing about a simpler time in Will’s shack in Red Crossing, learning Elvhen and playing with hounds. There, she had no responsibilities as the ward of a noble and everything had been most straightforward (with a few notable exceptions). This all occurred to him, but was improbably based on the discussions they had together. As far as Hannibal knew, much of her attachment to the Seeker had reduced with prolonged separation.

The Comte went to check on his ward and her friend. They had become fast friends again after some initial awkwardness. It was easy to see why the two would have bonded, guilt was a powerful binding. Their closeness would be very helpful later when he inevitably would be letting the young woman out for his own reasons. Two people often served as better evidence than one. It was this reason, stepping down into the dark and dim interior of their living space, that Hannibal was surprised to see only Abigail waiting for him.

“Are you alright?” she furtively asked, rushing towards him before his feet were solid on the floor. Her anxiousness betrayed her; she was worried about him. The trumpets of triumph roared in his head, victory was on the horizon.

“I am perfectly well. No bumps or bruises,” he joked, but she didn’t look amused.

“Please don’t joke about this. There’s always a chance that Beverly could lead back to us!” It pleased him that she was so attached to him. There was a good chance that it was out of self-preservation, but he suspected that the young woman actually was concerned about him. His treatment was working. “I understand that retreating or leaving would be more suspicious, but I want you to think about your safety first and foremost.”

“I assure you that I am,” he replied with a small smile just for her. “I understand your concern, but I have been doing this for a long time, Abigail. I know what I’m doing. This isn’t even the first time that a Seeker investigating me has gone missing.”

“Did she tell anyone?”

“Not as far as I can tell. I’m more concerned about how you are faring. You did know her fairly well,” he gently asked. No need for an interrogation when the answer was clear.

“My affection for her is significantly less than my concern for the three of us and Will.” Good.

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Immediately after Jack had escaped Chilton, he investigated Beverly’s absence. According to the many Seekers housed at the Bastion, she had been extremely withdrawn, which was abnormal for her, and then had gone to see Will. Following their conversation, she had left, but did not give an explanation for her departure nor did she say where she had been going. It was so like his second to try and solve things on her own and that could be extremely frustrating. This was especially the case now, because she had disappeared several days ago. It wasn’t like Beverly to be missing for days. Maybe a day, but not much more.

His answer came that afternoon with a missive from Freddie Lounds telling him that she believed she found Beverly. He had left immediately afterwards, pushing his horse to halve the time it would take to get there. The bard was surprisingly still there when he arrived.

As soon as he stepped off the horse, several other Seekers already dismounting and establishing a perimeter, she ran up to him. The smaller woman even pushed a couple of Seekers aside when they tried to stop her from rushing. “Jack,” she gasped out. “You need to send someone else. Anyone. It's not pretty.” Jack was used to things not being pretty. He walked right past her. “You need to prepare yourself.”

With her lingering words following him into the Observatoire, where he had found Miriam Lass’s arm and Frederick Chilton half-dead, he knew that whatever it was had to be terrible. He remembered the look of genuine horror on her face. Even with the blood of a dead man drenching her, Freddie Lounds hadn’t looked that terrified or genuine.

The main room only had some dust disturbed; the building was still largely abandoned. Unlike the last couple of times that he had visited, the half-rotted gossamer sheets didn’t obscure anything. Instead, there was a strange blockade in the middle of the floor where the telescope might have been. Where he remembered the last piece of Miriam Lass being. There was an opening, covered by a clean sheet which looked recently moved. Jack pushed it aside without hesitation, and instantly recalled his confusion over Lounds’ horror. He knew why when he saw her. Beverly. Torn apart, clearly the work of the Highwayman. Another member of his team that he had failed.

That meant it was his job to inform the rest of the squad. One of the Seekers accompanying him, very carefully not one of his team, got him a fresh horse, and Jack drove himself back to the Bastion, where they were waiting. It was through the night, and he got absolutely no

sleep, but this was something they urgently needed to know. It was something they deserved to know after all they had been through. Even Will.

When he arrived, Jack fell off his horse. His waiting team helped him up and demanded that he got some sleep, which he resented. The Seeker awoke sometime later, perhaps mid-afternoon, and immediately went to them. They needed to know before anyone else had the chance to speak. Every person that had gone with him remained at the scene to maintain its integrity, so there wasn't another person that would be able to say anything first.

Luckily for Jack, the remaining three were gathered together in the dining hall. His approach grabbed their attention and they appeared more than ready for whatever he had to say. He had to be fair to them; he had left without any prior warning. They collectively studied the look on his face, and their eyes said that they knew grief was coming. He motioned for them to come away, and they abandoned their plates.

Alone, he told them.

"Will informed me yesterday that he had not seen Seeker Beverly Katz in several days. I began searching for any information on her whereabouts, and the only bit I found was a tip from Freddie Lounds saying that she had found someone in the Observatoire de Verchiel. I left posthaste, regretfully not informing any of you, with a small team of Seekers from the Bastion. Shortly after arrival, we found and identified a female body, Beverly Katz. She was killed in the line of duty, presumably by the Highwayman as a result of direct confrontation."

Nobody moved, but their faces were breaking. This was not how this should have been done. He would have to leave again soon to collect the body, and his team would need to accompany him. They should be allowed to mourn.

"As soon as we are able, the Seekers are going to give her a proper Andrastian funeral."

Seeing them break down was one of the hardest things that he had ever done. Jimmy was probably the hardest; his face transformed several times before settling on agony. Brian, as much as he tried to pretend that he was stoic, was crying, and the two of them settled on wrapping one arm around each other to maintain contact. Alana hadn't moved. Her face twitched slightly, and Jack could tell that she was in shock. He swallowed, trying to think of something else to say something that would make this better, but he couldn't. They had lost a comrade, a friend, and a member of their family. He stayed with them as they processed the initial wave, being their silent support. Once it had settled, he informed him that there was someone else that he needed to speak to before he left, but if they wanted, they could help him collect Beverly. Every single one said yes.

So, Jack walked down into the dungeon. It felt strange to be going two days in a row to see Will when he hadn't for so much time. They had once been such staples in each other's lives. It occurred to him that it had been roughly three months since it had all gone down: one month of Will on the run with young Abigail Hobbs and two since he had been imprisoned. A single moment stretched out across time, making a month feel so much longer. Jack felt like he had aged years, and it was more prominent in this moment than any other he could think of in his life.

So he told Will. The man's reaction was by far the most startling. Somehow, he cried without his face moving a single muscle, tears pouring from the corner of his eyes. Then, without a single word to Jack, he looked away to something beside him. "I'm so sorry, Will," Jack told him, hoping to get a response despite the inadequacy of the words.

"I want to see her," Will stated firmly. Jack wouldn't refuse.

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Chilton, of course, had to make the whole thing a huge ceremony. It didn't matter that Will hadn't done anything to anyone since his incarceration or that Chilton even had a small inkling that Will wasn't at fault for any of his murders; the High Seeker needed to parade him around and let everyone know what a dangerous catch he had in his dungeon. Much as he would like to have said that Frederick's behavior surprised him, it didn't. Some of it was understandable as the journey would take most of the day, but only some.

They placed a heavy metal collar around his shoulders, which already made movement difficult as too much of it caused the collar to dig into his neck. From the collar came several large chain loops, six extending from different equidistant points. His ankles were shackled mere inches from one another, only allowing small shuffling steps, and heavy cuffs of silverite which weighed down his hands. The cuffs were pulled behind him, causing the arms already strained by his collar to ache, where they were chained together and then that chain was attached to a loop on the collar. To make it a little more insulting, on one of the loops, Frederick added a bright red rope to lead him around with. The Seekers trussing him up saved the best for last. In a brilliant coup de grace, they shoved a mask onto his face which largely blinded him to the outside world. It was volcanically black and only allowed slits for eyes and some around where his mouth would be. Before they finished tightening it, the more sadistic Seeker shoved a bit in his mouth and hooked it around the outside.

The whole ensemble made him look twice as big as he actually was and was bitingly cold. Will was loaded into another moving cage and forced to endure the off-key singing from one of the younger Seekers that echoed through his head for the entire journey while constantly trying to soothe his aching jowls. He was lucky that the bit wasn't metal as he consistently knocked sensitive teeth into it. It was night when the group eventually arrived, and Will wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel about it. His stomach ached from the thought of what might be found. His last two visits to the building hadn't been pleasant.

Entering the Observatoire punched the air from Will's lungs. His vision was slightly obstructed by the visibility of the mask he wore as it only gave slits for eye holes. What he could see only sent dread sinking in his gut like a stone, actual physical pain following it. The sheets that had previously obscured the different sections of the main room and sat on the furniture were gone. All of it had been lined up in the middle, a wall made to obscure a small secret. A secret Will knew, but didn't want to. Just barely visible, blood and water mixing together and pooled on the ground, spreading out from under the sheet and piled furniture. He tried to shuffle forward, but the chains around his ankles caught on his legs and he pitched towards the ground. The only thing that saved him from a bloody nose was Jack Crawford noticing the move and grabbing him.

“Leave us alone,” Jack barked to the escort, who glanced at him out of the corner of his eye before taking off. Jack stood him upright, Will watching warily behind the slits of the mask, unsure of what was going to proceed. He had dropped the lead, when he had helped Will. The Seeker looked to the heavens as if his Maker could say anything back, despite his standing mute response to all His followers. Without a word, the Seeker drew his sword with his left hand, and with his right he began undoing some of Will’s chains. How he managed to get the key off of Chilton, Will had no idea. It was rough for the most part, a bit of manhandling, but finally his limbs were released and the ridiculously heavy contraption on his chest was removed. Jack undid the blinder and bit on his head, gently this time and not protesting when Will reached up to take it off as well. He was free! Then, he glanced at the wall in the middle of the room and sobriety undercut any optimistic thought.

“Don’t get too excited,” Jack declared. “We’re going to have to put all of that back on.” So he wasn’t free, simply allowed to walk freely for the moment. Still, even a momentary liberation was a relief, even if it was under these circumstances. Especially under these circumstances. He would be allowed to mourn Beverly out of confinement, a person instead of an animal or a monster.

Will took a hesitant step forward. Then another. Another. Each step brought him closer to the drapery that stood between him and his dead friend. When he was in front of it, his hand reached out to gently touch the fabric and stopped. Whatever monstrosity Hannibal had left for him was behind this curtain; he could remain ignorant of her death if he didn’t pull it back, safe. Perhaps Will could even pretend that Beverly had never died, that she hadn’t been murdered at Hannibal’s hands (and at his). He wanted to. He really wanted to. What he wanted didn’t matter, though. This was about justice and righteous wrath. His friend, once his best friend, deserved more than his ignorance and denial. Jack’s presence behind him faded away; he could practically feel the man’s steps away from the centerpiece. The curtain parted, revealing the aftermath of his friendship.

Beverly was splayed on the same small table that Frederick Chilton had to have been on when they were here last, arms pinned to it with long, sharp needles driven through the wood. The overall presentation of her body evoked a cadaver on display to teach a student about the body. Careful incisions had been made to show of the vitals, each layer going deeper. One, in the very center of her torso, went all the way through her and out of the other side, a hole going all of the way through the table. That explained the sheer amount of blood. A butterfly on a board. Will was grateful that her killer, Hannibal, had allowed her a sheet for decency. He bent down to look under the table and found a runestone attached to it. The elf tried to reach out to it, but the rune was freezing so much that it burned. A Rune of Cold.

Will closed his eyes, trying to push himself into the Fade. He wanted to see the death, feel the remnants of Beverly and her last moments in this world. His mind reached out as he desperately attempted to sleep, but his entire body was jittery from the ride and the anxious anticipation of seeing her. He just couldn’t force his mind to rest; the more he tried, the more awake he felt. Giving up, Will tried to return to Jack before a faint warmth blossomed on his neck. It got stronger, not hotter but broader. The warmth chased away his chill by spreading through his limbs, a constant comfort. In the fortress of his mind, the wind blew, and the scent it carried helped Will know that this presence was Beverly. The heat was a heavy

blanket over his senses and each nerve and muscle relaxed, one by one, until his breathing was so deep that he would fill his entire lungs to bursting with a single inhale.

There he was, standing over Beverly's body in the Observatoire. Slowly, the entrails trailing from her innards spiraled back into her, the spikes removing themselves from her wrists. The sheet lengthened and extended, wrapping around her torso and limbs as they gradually became her regular clothes. Abruptly, she sat up, and her flesh began knitting back together. He took several steps back and allowed her to rise. Vaguely, he was aware that the surroundings had begun to change appearance, they were no longer the Observatoire, but somewhere else, a basement? As he watched, purple bruising erupted on her neck and then faded away, the over-ripeness of a dropped fruit in reverse. Finally, his friend's eyes staring at his, eye to eye, made the muffled world mute. It was just them.

Will held out a hesitant hand to her face, pushing back the stray hairs that always managed to fall from her braid. Usually she would laugh or swat him for it, but this Beverly stayed utterly blank. Even as the moment of clarity flared within his being, the spirit of her killer shoved it back down. The lulling gesture of a hand running through hair took on an air of menace as he walked around her and the hand wrapped itself around her throat.

He pounced, and the world exploded in sensation.

Beverly struggled against him, using every technique she could think of to knock off her attacker, but he was aware of them too. With her brain rapidly losing vital oxygen and actively fighting against the adrenaline coursing through her, Beverly's movements became sluggish and she accidentally telegraphed him. Countering was simple. A flick of vision showed her eyes glaring at him with hatred, the kind that only came from personal betrayal. She knew him, and he knew her too.

Eventually, the fighting ceased, and he dropped her from his arms. The scene changed into another, one where she lay on a cart, bound to a board with a Frost Rune to keep her chilled. He had been preparing the area over night when he had the time; it had been a very busy couple of days. Still, it wouldn't do for her to be found anything less than fresh. He set her up as he had seen during the University classes that he had attended. She would educate her peers on what would happen should they come after him, and she would serve as a lesson to Will about involving others in their game. He tried to allow her dignity and respect, as she was someone that often educated others as well.

A hand broke Will out of his dream, and he reached up his own to feel the soaking tear tracks down his face. He didn't have much of a sleeve, but he tried desperately to wipe away his weakness, but the hand stopped him and turned him around. Jack Crawford watched him with wary and sad eyes. A thought rang through the back of his head: she found something.

"Are you alright?"

He looked back at her body. "No."

A full body slump, and then Jack Crawford stared at his once second-in-command. "It was the Highwayman."

Will nodded, “The Highwayman and the Copy Killer. One killer. Two masks. Same monster beneath.” He held in a sob that threatened to escape. “Beverly helped me see it.”

“Then help me see it.”

Will stifled his immediate response. He wanted to tell Jack who it was, but what good would it do? Jack wouldn't hear it, wouldn’t believe him. Say what you will about the man believing his innocence (or lack of responsibility), but he hadn’t believed Will when the actual killer was pointed out to him. Beverly hadn’t either until she had seen the tests Chilton had run for herself. Jack would need to have the evidence given to him from multiple different sources to establish validity before he would jump on someone for guilt unless his instincts screamed it to him. They hadn’t about Hannibal so far. If Will wanted Jack to believe him, he would need to ensure that Jack would receive the evidence he needed to come to his own conclusion. “Beverly was looking for a connection between the Highwayman and the Copy Killer.”

Jack side-eyed him. “You think she found it?”

“She found something.” Will sighed. “I wanted Beverly to wait until you were here. We had several discussions about what we thought the connection was, but she wanted to speed up the process to get me out of here. I told her not to, but she went looking for evidence.” A sob bubbled up and he let it free. “She met him last night, Jack. The Highwayman. She’ll be missing organs.”

“Who is he, Will?”

He couldn’t say. No matter how much he wanted to, Will couldn’t tell him. It would accomplish nothing. “She made her connection. You have to make your own, Jack. I can’t make it for you.”

Jack’s anger sizzled on the surface, a look of utter grief and frustration. “What did I bring you here for then?” Will knew that the larger man wouldn’t erupt into violence over this, but it didn’t make him any less wary. If anything, Will could more strongly empathize with Jack right now then anyone, he felt the same hatred too. So, he allowed himself a little vulnerability from a man who had seen him fall time and time again. “A chance to say goodbye.”

The journey back to his little cage had gone overnight. Jack had to help him back in the gear, but the situation could have been far worse. At the very least, the larger man was gentle and left the bit loose. Will could tell that he despised the fact that Will was forced to wear one and had he been in charge of the trip and not been as closely watched he would have left most of the ensemble off. It was a relief to be able to spit the bit out when people weren’t watching. People don’t realize how distracting face and head pain can be until it's happening. He was brought back to his little cage with just as much pageantry so that when Chilton finally came to visit at lunch, Will was about ready to strangle him.

The High Seeker had placed his chair closer to the bars today, so it wouldn’t have been that difficult. His entire posture screamed ‘I think I’m in charge’. While he may strut about like he held all of the power, both of them knew that wasn’t true. A certain someone outside of both of their reaches could walk all over either of them. Will’s attempts at preventing another

power shift had backfired when Chilton had blabbed to precisely the wrong person, so he was left playing catch-up. The two of them, therefore, had something they needed to discuss if Will wanted to be successful.

“Would you like to talk about what happened at the Observatoire? I understand that the death of a friend can be very traumatic.” He would like that, wouldn’t he? Occasionally Will had to admire what the small instinct of a naturalist that the man had, but his stupidity and ignorance circumvented his more interesting attributes.

Will dove in for the kill. “You discussed me with Comte Hannibal Lecter and allowed him in to see me.”

“I had to let him in. Jack Crawford told me that Comte Lecter has the Empress’s favor, and it’s not like I could risk him going back to her.” Fair enough.

“That still doesn’t explain why you told him what we learned.”

“I gave him a peek,” Chilton said. “The hope was to scare him off.”

“He doesn’t scare easily.”

Frederick rolled his eyes. “I am aware. You didn’t help at all when you whispered in his ear that I was planting false memories with hypnotics.”

Will grinned which seemed to do a good job of unnerving his warden. “I have appearances to maintain.”

“Quid pro quo?”

“Tit for tat.”

Frederick shook his head and began flipping through the notebook he had taken to bringing with him when he went to visit Will. The elf wasn’t quite sure how to feel about any information regarding his person being recorded (not that he really could do anything about it). The High Seeker read off of the page, “Beverly Katz was recently found murdered, her last documented contact was with you. What did you two talk about?”

The imprisoned elf couldn’t hold back a laugh. The things the man pretended to know and then what he actually did. “You didn’t have someone spying on us?”

“You two weren’t making it easy,” Chilton replied and had the good sense about himself to look more amused than upset. “I usually have standing orders for the Seeker guards to pay attention to what you’re saying, but you kept your voice low enough that they had a hard time making anything out.” Will wasn’t surprised. It was nice that the man was open about it though, probably because it wasn’t like telling Will would change much of the situation.

Chilton was honest, so Will thought he should be a little truthful in return. “We talked about the Highwayman, then she went and found him.”

High Seeker Chilton stiffened, although Will couldn't determine whether it came from fear, recognition, or something else entirely. If he had to guess, the elf might've said recognition. A couple of the traits that denoted fear were absent, although maybe Chiton knew something of controlling facial tics the Orlesian way. Will usually didn't pay that much attention to Frederick's face. Be that as it may, Will wasn't in the habit of guessing. He extrapolated, deduced, and inferred, but never guessed.

"It was many years ago, but I was a part of the Highwayman case. Before Gideon." If it was in any meaningful capacity, Will hadn't heard about it. "It was around the time that Miriam Lass was killed. She was a novice and therefore under my care, and Jack blamed himself for her death. It became very personal for him, so I was even asked to take over for a temporary period of time."

Seeing as he was currently in a cell and his best friend was dead as a result of the machinations of the Highwayman, Will thought he could sympathize. "Well, it has become very personal for me." He let that statement stew in his captor's mind. Then, a thought occurred to him. There was one other person still alive that knew for sure who the Highwayman was. This man had seen him and interacted with him. If Will could get him here, there was another person that would corroborate his accusation. It wasn't a surefire thing, but it was a start. "You thought Abel Gideon was the Highwayman," he remarked slowly, trying to lead Frederick to a conclusion for himself.

"Evidently I was wrong about that," came the self-deprecating response.

"Gideon knows who the Highwayman is," Will replied, pulling Frederick along.

Frederick mocked instead, "And I suppose you do too."

"Of course." Will smiled. "Wouldn't it be interesting if we both told you the same name?"

"Yes, it would." Frederick was starting to get it.

The man never needed subtle manipulation. All it would require was an appeal to his vanity. "It's such a shame that we can't talk to Abel Gideon about the Highwayman." He still didn't look convinced, so Will gave him a little nudge. "Just think, Frederick. You could be the one who catches him after all."

The High Seeker smiled, probably in a manner he thought was enigmatic but truly came across as self-satisfied. Will had him, hook, line, and sinker and was starting to see victory on the horizon. Gideon wouldn't set him free just yet, but it would be his testimony that put more suspicion on Hannibal. Then, justice would be done and Will… It didn't really matter what happened to Will after.

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Abel Gideon was just starting to achieve some form of contentment.

Despite the situation he was in, that wasn't an exaggeration. Damn Frederick to the deepest parts of the Abyss for all that he had done to him, but at some point in the months between

his escape from the Bastion and his relocation to the even deeper depths of the Seeker fortress, he had come to terms with himself. The blue glow was meditative when he was blessed with it and the Seeker guards outside of his door learned to tolerate his off-key singing, even though they clearly wanted to wring his neck. Fortunately for him (or unfortunately), Abel's little adventure had made him high profile in the Empire. He was still receiving fan mail, which was read to him by a poor novice every week or so. His mind was still fuzzy and full of buzzing, but he felt like he was making some progress to putting his house in order.

Then, Seekers in full armor came and removed him. They weren't gentle in their dragging and the clean air finally made him realize how terrible he smelled. He was moved to a new room a little higher in the dungeons, which was a little better lit, but not by much. This room had two cells opposing each other in battle, allowing the cellmates to view each other, but not contact directly. They were clearly once two separate rooms (if the presence of two doors to the outside was any indication, but the wall in between them had been torn down very recently. Someone threw a bucket of water onto him, which only made him wet. It did not improve the odor.

The door opened while they were finished setting up and Frederick walked in, prancing about with his cane. Abel looked at it directly which made the High Seeker look self conscious and uncomfortable at the attention drawn to the present reminder about what Abel had done to him. He enjoyed the rush of self-satisfaction.

"Frederick," he greeted, smirking and pleased with the turn of events. He still wasn't quite sure what was happening, but it was big enough that the man actually came to see him, despite their bad blood. "It appears that someone managed to put you back together. Is everything where I found it?"

Chilton frowned. Too bad. "With one or two exceptions." The man stepped closer to the bars of Abel's new cell while he was still cuffed. He whispered, "I know I am not the most loved of administrators or teachers. Some even question my legitimacy as High Seeker, which is ridiculous. However, the young novice that you murdered was well-liked. She had a lot of potential. They won't be forgetting that anytime soon. Behave yourself in your new accommodations." He spoke like he was doing Abel a favor, which sprouted anew his resentment for the man.

Stepping away, Chilton motioned for the Seeker to allow him use of his arms and legs now that they were a distance away. For the first time since they had known each other, Frederick's face was completely blank, like he was still deciding how to feel. "Nothing like grief and trauma to bring people together," he muttered and walked towards the door, his new guards trailing behind their leader. He threw back at Abel, "Welcome back, Abel." Then, Frederick left, shutting Gideon off and he was alone again.

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Jack Crawford, for the first time in two and a half decades, was having trouble looking at a corpse. He considered himself a hardened Seeker of Truth, someone that had seen some of the worst that people in general had to offer. Plenty of teammates had died on him in grotesque ways, but none like this. Beverly Katz was his second in command and the person

that was going to take over the team after he was gone. The people that had collected her had tried to give her some semblance of decency, but keeping her body after her spirit was gone was not what he would have wanted for her. Jack would have given her a quick Andrastian funeral, fire as high as it could to show their respect, but that wasn't possible. Beverly had been a murder victim, and thus her body needed to be kept for the investigation. Once they had all they could from her, then she would be allowed to rest.

For the rest of the squad, work was never done. They were celebrating All Souls' Day by examining her body. Jimmy, Alana, and Brian were standing behind him, all of the gazes inevitably pulled by the body on the table in front of them, white sheet covering the worst of the damage. As soon as it had arrived, the three of them had been pooling their knowledge: Brian was examining the body for anything suspicious, Jimmy had arrived late because he was checking the scene for magic, and Alana immediately hit the books and had been diligently researching. Now, they were checking in with Jack on what they had found so far before they would continue.

Jack was tired of death. It had hung over him with Will, almost become reality with Bella, and now sat before him with Beverly. Too often had he contemplated it lately.

They had all taken to the task, but he had several volunteers approach him about taking their place. Jack doubted that anyone would agree to it, but he felt it was his obligation to put the offer out to his team. "Beverly's death isn't anyone's responsibility, least of all yours. You should be allowed to grieve the loss, not wade through it. If anyone needs to step away, we have people on standby happy to take up for you."

"What about you Jack?" Alana asked, ever concerned for other people even when she hadn't known them as long. Jack knew that she and Beverly had become close. There might have been something there, there might not have been. Whatever the case may be, she was just as affected by the loss as the rest of them.

Too much. If he allowed himself even a moment, it might overwhelm him. So much had happened. "I can't afford the luxury of grief." Perhaps he had been too honest with his answer, but if anyone would hear those words and not judge him, it would be these three people.

Brian shook his head, and spoke in a cracked voice, "No luxury in feeling this way." The team had been a family for so long, especially for Brian. Jack knew that he had found no comfort being raised in the Chantry, not like Jimmy had. The Seekers had been his first real home and they had been together since his beginning. He had lost a sister.

"If I grieve Beverly, then I'm not catching her killer."

"We're not running away from what happened, Jack," came from Jimmy. Among their little group, he had been the voice of reason and humor. His experience among the Templars had shaped him in ways the others hadn't; he had seen brothers-in-arms die on more than one occasion. Their group had seen him at his most vulnerable, through the detoxification and slow move away from lyrium. They also not judged him when he turned to alcohol to stop the shaking, much as it worried them. "Beverly wouldn't."

That was the crux of it. No matter what happened, no matter how badly things went, Beverly never walked away. That was why she had been his second and what had drawn his attention in the first place. It was why he had recruited her to their Order. Beverly Katz was a woman with a strong sense of justice and compassion, especially when it seemed like she didn't. Her ability to compartmentalize was second to none.

Brian tapped Jack on the shoulder, drawing him away from his introspection. "I found something last night. I almost panicked when I saw it because I had been touching it with my bare hands. I waited til now to show you so you would get some sleep." He walked over to a separate bundle, this one in a small metal container like the ones that were used to smuggle lyrium. It was extremely fatal to touch raw lyrium for non-dwarves, and it often hurt dwarves very badly, physically and mentally. It also had the tendency to spontaneously explode. Whatever Brian had found, he had thought this was required to contain it.

He opened the box and Jack took a step back. "I found these where her kidneys were supposed to be." Inside, there were two kidneys, but they were grey and had prominent black veins of corruption. "They're Blighted."

"I can see that," Jack muttered as he motioned for the younger Seeker to close the box.

Alana came forward, "When Brian mentioned that, I went looking through Beverly's notes on the tainted woman that was killing all of those noblewomen, since she had access to the body before she left. She did mention that the kidneys were missing."

"I cleared some ambient magic." Jimmy was never one to be left out of a conversation. "It did appear like someone used a Glyph of Preservation. I'm not sure why though, the Blight isn't especially tasty." He chuckled, but the rest of them weren't amused.

"Whoever killed her also murdered Beverly and swapped out their kidneys," Jack deduced.

"The Highwayman's swapping out organs now?" Jimmy asked. "I thought he was just harvesting them."

The team leader stared for a moment, putting his thoughts in order. "He kept these too, for whatever reason he thought them important enough to preserve. Something tells me that that isn't the case with all of them, lest he is a mage. Even then, with all of his kills that's a lot of work and very draining. I have a feeling these were kept for a reason. They're fairly distinct and easily identified." He turned to look at them and saw three horrified expressions slowly grow. "We used to think the Highwayman just killed three or four and then did nothing for months, even years. He wants us to know that he never stops. He just kills as different killers."

Brian chimed in, "First the blighted woman, then Beverly. What about the Templar and Grand Cleric at Will's trial? They were fairly intricate."

"They didn't have any organs taken," Jimmy said.

Alana might have smiled, her voice certainly did, but it was much too bitter and tired for it. "I think we just established that that's not necessarily a requirement. If he took organs every

time it would be much more noticeable."

"Besides," Jack said. "Will was convinced whomever killed the Templar was not the Highwayman."

Jimmy shrugged, "That still leaves the Grand Cleric. Other than the mode of death, we don't have anything that directly links them together."

"Will said that Beverly was looking for connections between the Highwayman and the Copy Killer. I want to know what she may have found."

Brian seemed dubious. "A connection? I thought it was pretty firmly established that Will was the Copy Killer. Are you sure he's not just shooting off whatever he can think of?"

"I know," Jack said and saw the three out of the corner of his eye share glances. "But whatever the case, Will cared about Beverly. I doubt he would obfuscate about her death, not if it would help us catch her killer. If that's what he said she was doing, I believe him."

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Will was lounging by the fire, a warm, freshly caught, freshly cooked fish settling in his belly. When Abigail and Will ever tried to hunt, they almost never managed to get anything. Both of them agreed that they were pretty useless at it. Beverly had told the both of them that it was only because they hadn't learned how to do it properly. Will was too reluctant and Abigail too timid. It hurt Will, but he did agree with the statement; he always did have trouble finishing the job. He didn't mention it in front of Abigail (dream though she was), but the elf's mind always moved to Garrett Hobbs in that singular moment of death. Dream Abigail had already been more withdrawn lately, and he didn't want to push her further away. Logically Will knew this was a dream and he could control vast elements of it, but for some reason he never wanted to control her. In life, far too many people had. He wouldn't be one in death.

Abigail was sharing another dream with Will. This was the fourth or fifth time, and each occasion left her feeling strangely empty. One moment, she could laugh and smile, the man she had wanted to love like a father delighting in small victories. Not five seconds later, the human girl would be reminded of their relative positions and residences, prisons for the body and mind. This shared dreamscape was an escape for them, one she never truly grasped until she found herself clinging to the fragments of this small domestic fantasy when she woke in the morning. It almost never occurred to her that Hannibal wasn't in a single one of them.

Across from him, Beverly was digging into her own fish with much gusto. His friend, his best friend, was dead now. This was where he could still be with her, where their relationship never decayed and could still flourish. It had been mending; Will didn't believe that he had imagined that, and had hoped they would eventually come to where they had started, despite the scattered trust between them. Out there, in the land that called itself reality, Beverly was dead. Gone. She was never coming back. Here, he had made a place for her. His mind had a room where she could stay and spend time with her if he wished. She may not be Beverly as he knew her, but that didn't matter here.

Abigail kept glancing to the side. Of all of the people that WIll could invite into their shared dreamspace, it had to be Beverly Katz. She liked the woman, but with the two of them here, it felt like she was trapped in a room with people that she had condemned or been complicit in the condemnation thereof. There was a wall between her and them. They laughed and joked; Abigail knew that Beverly wasn't real, but that didn't make their interactions seem any less genuine. Here, Will was happy (at least for the moment), and the world outside which she had given him was a landscape of pain.

She wanted him to be happy, so she pretended, but Abigail couldn't have felt more alone.

Will had noticed that Abigail was being even quieter than usual, if that was even possible. Every time he looked, she had a broad smile on her face, even if there was a twinge of sadness to it. It may be that the spirit that was acting as Abigail was jealous of Beverly's presence here or maybe thought that he needed her more right now. Whatever the case may be, the behavior was out of the norm for what he knew of spirits.

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When Abigail woke, she felt like she was going to be sick. Yesterday, she hadn't had any guilt over Beverly's death. It was a matter of survival for her, Georgia, and Hannibal. If he had lost, Hannibal would have likely died or been taken by the Seekers of Truth and then where would the rest of them be? They were technically criminals. Georgia was a known murderer and Abigail a suspected one. If they were found, it could end badly.

Speaking of Georgia, Abigail hurling herself out of bed to kneel above the nearest empty chamber pot woke her. The young woman looked up to see her mage friend smiling softly before sitting down next to her. "Bad dream?" Abigail nodded. "I'm pretty familiar with those. Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not really," the brunette replied. Georgia nodded and started to stand up, but she reached for the blonde and had her sit back down. "I don't really want to, but I probably should. You're supposed to talk about the bad stuff so that you understand it."

Her mage laughed, "You say that like it's a question! Yes, you need to talk about things that are bothering you. When I was in the Circle, we had to be on watch for demons. Dreams are often their vehicle of choice to get people to do what they wanted, so we were taught early on to discuss them with each other." She paused for a moment before considering her next words. Probably afraid that they would contradict what came before. "Privately, of course. We didn't want the Templars to think we were on the verge of being possessed at any moment." Georgia sobered slightly. "It's why I lasted as long as I did before I begged for Tranquility."

"You're a Dreamer, right?"

"I am. I'm fairly weak for one, but that's still stronger than most mages."

"What's it like? To share dreams?"

Georgia frowned in concentration. “I’m not really sure. I was never strong enough to walk into the dreams of others. I was just highly aware of my surroundings and could control them.”

If there was anyone besides Hannibal that Abigail could trust with this information, it would be Georgia. “I’ve been sharing dreams with Will. I don’t think he’s meant to walk into mine. I’ve been away from him for so long that it’s my only real connection to him.”

“You remember it? You must have an incredibly strong bond or some sort of magic in your blood.”

“Is that possible?” Abigail asked, a little confused and excited at the same time.

Georgia shrugged. “I don’t know. Some mages are so weak that they can only cast basic spells, barely making a flicker of flame. They dream almost like normal people. The Templars don’t usually bother them as much because of their lack of talent. They’re easy to cut down should they become possessed or decide to revolt. If magic can manifest on a spectrum, perhaps you have enough magic in your blood to remember some of your dreams, but not enough to cast a rudimentary spell.”

“That would be interesting,” Abigail replied and thought about it. She thought it would be wonderful if she had some sort of magic that manifested. It would be another connection between her and Will and another tool in her kit. Magic was incredibly powerful, even though it came at a price. Maybe, if she manifested somehow, Abigail would be able to get Will to teach her… once they were reunited of course.

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As far as Will knew, prior to this moment but after the last time they saw each other, Gideon had been kept in the absolute bottom of this pit of a dungeon. It showed. His skin was pale and drawn; if he hadn’t been Abel Gideon, Will would have worried after his health. As such, he was, and Will had no time for worry anymore. Yesterday was the day for the remembrance of the dead, so his mind lingered over Beverly even more than usual.

After Will’s suggestion, Chilton had immediately set to work creating a paired cell that still kept them in separate cages, but allowed them to converse. It had taken less than a day, but the results were rather unrefined. He had simply broken down the wall that separated two cells where the part the prisoners sat in meant they would be facing one another. They were still the same size and had the sparse furnishing that came with the cells of the Bastion meant to hold prisoners indefinitely, but not for the purpose of torture, interrogation, etc. It was still nearly pitch dark with the only alleviation being magelights added to alcoves in the walls. The eerie blue light only served to make Gideon appear more sickly. Will wished for sunshine; he had no clue how good he had it at the White Spire. His abnormality meant they didn’t want to take the chance of him escaping, so he was kept nearer to the surface. Much as that logic felt contradictory, it meant that Templars were more inclined to watch him **and** the daylight meant they would actually stay awake and aware. Here, there was no small window that allowed him to peek into the outside world and feel the warmth of day. Damp stone and empty halls were their only companion as they were the only two people that the Seekers of Truth ever bothered to imprison.

When Gideon saw him being brought in, the man raised an eyebrow; it was so dramatic that it remained visible even in this lighting. “Messere Will. You always did look like your average knife ear.” He smirked, which let Will know the slur was meant to provoke him. “Is it true that you ate that poor Hobbs girl?” Gideon poked when he didn’t receive a reaction with the first jab.

Will wasn’t going to provide him one. “You may call me Will, now that we are of equal social standing.”

Abel stared at him, apparently not comprehending why he couldn’t get a rise out of the young man. He shouldn’t have been surprised; Will hadn’t given him much of one the first time they saw each other (back when Will had a mostly firm grasp on his mind). He supposed that the former Seeker was basing his judgement on the last time they saw each other when Will tried to kill him, but Will was out of his head then. More than usual. “Is this Frederick’s idea of punishment? Force me to share space and stare all day at the man that tried to kill me.”

“I’d like to talk to you about the Highwayman.”

“Thought I was the Highwayman,” Gideon said, still testing out the waters. Will knew very well that he didn’t actually think that, but the human put on a good show of it.

“No, no. You’re the pretender to the throne,” Will tried to put as much derision into the statement that he could muster and was pleased to see that it translated across.

“Is this some new form of interrogation then, or is it meant to be a way for me to gain back my mind?” He chuckled. “A somewhat radical approach. Then again, Frederick always did like that sort of thing.” Gideon leaned forward against the bars, the same position he adopted when they first met. A power play or some sort of intimidation tactic? No, it was probably unconscious. The last time that Abel Gideon had felt confident was when he actually thought he was the Highwayman. This was how he thought the Highwayman acted. “What did you offer him to bring me back?” Abel gave him an up and down look that made Will uncomfortable. “Must’ve been something valuable; I’m the last person he wants to see. I give him a visceral chill in the guts. What’s left of them, anyhow.”

Will answered quickly to prevent him from getting any ideas. “You know who the Highwayman is. You’ve met him.”

Understanding dawned on Gideon. “So Frederick gets to catch the Highwayman afterall. What do you get?” It held an undercurrent of anger.

Lately, Will found leaving a kernal of honesty was his best bet. More than anyone, Abel Gideon probably understood a good portion of what he was going through, and didn’t that rankle? To have something in common with a murderer made Will irritable, but he had to keep this conversation in perspective. Besides, Gideon had been a victim too, Frederick’s victim in fact. “I want to stop the man who murdered my friend,” Will decided.

“Despite the connotations of the name, the Highwayman is quite the courtly fellow,” his cellmate said. “He’s playing out a mannerly dance, getting close, but not too close. He offers tokens of goodwill, but is careful not to give away too much.”

Will's retort was instant. "He gave you away." On Gideon's questioning look, he elaborated. "I remember the night in my shack with Comte Lecter. The night I took you there."

"The night you tried to kill me," Abel pointed out, but Will forged on.

"How do you think I found you? He **sent** me to kill you, Abel."

"Am I your evidence?" Here, Gideon outright laughed, and Will felt a little foolish. He should have expected this kind of reaction, but the promise of victory had seemed too close to ignore. "You're in trouble now."

"Why would you protect him?"

Abel shrugged, "He's done nothing to me." Will tried to protest, but he kept going. "You were happy enough to try and kill me yourself. You have it 'in you' as they say. I'm intrigued to see what you try when I say no." Will swallowed, not liking where the conversation was going, but knowing it was vital that he hear these words. "He is a demon, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Smoke. You'll never **catch** the Highwayman; he won't be caught." Gideon turned, staring directly into Will's eyes. He screamed internally as the urge built to turn them away, but found himself entranced despite this. "If you want you, you will have to kill him."

He was right. They didn't find evidence during the cursory search before, Will doubted they would now. Beverly's search probably had him hide whatever he could away, eating the last of his stock. There would be nothing. The righteous part of him stretched its weary limbs, and Will knew what he had to do. "Fair enough," he replied and turned away. The declaration felt appropriate: honoring a death by contemplating another.

If he hadn't averted his gaze, he might have seen the disconcerted look that passed over Abel Gideon's face.

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Hannibal had always believed in making meals a formal affair. Usually when he dined with Frederick Chilton, he made a point of subtle spite by making the dinner purposefully simpler. That was not the case for this meal, mostly because he wanted something from the man. His Lordship was still careful not to go too overboard,, lest the High Seeker realize the insult of their former dining experiences. Luckily, they were meeting for lunch, which was generally expected to be less extravagant. Chilton probably wasn't versed enough in the Game to notice that it would be more than their previous meals.

While this estate wasn't nearly as ostentatious as the one in Red Crossing, Halamshiral, or Val Royeaux, it did its job well. During his last, very brief, stint there, Hannibal had taken stock of all of the late Lord Froideveaux's holdings and more or less tossed them in the fire. Much of the furniture was sold or repurposed, and he spent his time on the way to Val Royeaux thinking of the best way to redecorate. He designed the rooms and figured out how he wanted to theme each. Lord Froideveaux had not quite updated his dining room planning, as having rooms for every meal for every day of the week for every season was no longer in fashion. Hannibal had it down to the current fashion trend of one per each season and then made the rest into guest rooms, servant rooms, or destroyed them to make bigger rooms. As

such, several wings were currently under construction. He had Frederick in the Autumn dining room, and it irked him that his first ‘formal’ affair with the dining room was with this man.

He kept his smile and posture genial, even while he suppressed his irritation. “Is it too early for brandy?” he asked, keeping conversation light as he brought the man to his seat.

“Depends on the brandy.”

“An Antivan Plum Brandy circa 7:88 Storm.”

“Mmm. Straight from the Felicisima Armada? Never too early then,” and he reached his hand out for the glass before Hannibal had properly extended it. Hannibal went over to the serving table at the side and pulled the plates from where the servants had left them warming.

“Boudin noir,” he declared as he placed the course in front of his guest. “More commonly referred to as pig blood sausage. I found the recipe as a young man from our family’s chef; it was meant as a peasant dish. I have modified it over the years of course.”

“I have noted that modification is your prerogative.”

“We have discussed before the malleability of the world around us, especially the mind. Other people simply do not choose to understand their uses. What I am trying to understand is why Abel Gideon is being brought back into the light,” he pointed out hoping to get somewhere. The High Seeker stiffened and he allowed a small smile. Nesiraya’s spies had done their job well among the Seekers of Truth. He had always found that they gave reliable information and it was good to be reminded of their competency. No one ever bothered suspecting servants.

Frederick attempted to recover. “It wasn’t for selfish reasons.” Clearly, it was for selfish reasons.

“What was it then? Pride? Curiosity? Abel Gideon disemboweled you, Frederick. Or are you simply trying to keep a closer eye on your misdeeds?”

Chilton smirked, not bothering to hide the expression. “My misdeeds and yours. Although Messere Lavellan is loath to admit it, you clearly violated his trust. It sinks into his mind like stones in a pond.”

Did he now? His instincts tried to push the thought forward, but he held it down and drowned it. Will wanted to trust him, he said as much. Naturally, that want came from a lack of surety which Hannibal would be glad to grant. For now, he needed to mollify the High Seeker. “A fact outside of my control. That tends to be the case when another person is involved. Neither of us control our stories well enough to get anything out of exposing the other’s misdeeds.”

“Cheers to that,” Chilton said and gulped down the brandy before tucking in. He took a few generous bites before he bothered to speak as decorum dictated. Hannibal was much gentler with his food once it was already dead. “I brought Gideon back to talk to Will.” His senses percolated. “He shot Gideon, yet has no memory of it.” That was a major flaw in Chilton’s

story. If he wanted to conceal both of their misdeeds so badly, then why was he trying to bring out hidden memories in Will. It was then that he decided exactly when he would need to go through with his plan to free Will. It could no longer hang undecided in the air like a pendulum. Either Chilton would recover all of Will's memories and he would lose the young man, or the High Seeker's careless attitude would cause severe damage to all of Hannibal's hard work. Not that he hadn't been contemplating framing him anyway, but this moved his timeline up.

"Memories, emotions, and even spiritual experiences can be manipulated while under hypnotics." Hannibal leveled him a sharp look and watched as his guest backtracked.

"He seems to believe I planted memories. It's an extraordinary claim," he said shakily, staring with wide eyes. The comment and allusion had thrown him off, which was just an enjoyable incident to satisfy his urge to crush for the night.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," Hannibal reminded and enjoyed the panic on Chiton's face as he registered just exactly what he was saying.

"I'm trying to pick up the pieces, help him rebuild his broken brain." That was exactly the opposite of what Hannibal wanted, but he gave the High Seeker points for trying.

"Since he seems so vital to Will's recovery, might I speak with Gideon? There are a variety of things I would be interested in examining."

Frederick Chilton gulped.

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When Frederick had told him that he was receiving a visitor, he knew that the man was expecting him to be on his worst behavior, hence the early general threat. He had to have been expecting it; he had gradually learned the art of genial threatening and it terrified a lot of the younger recruits that Frederick threw at him. The man had carefully escorted Will out of the room beforehand, the two of them flashing looks at each other, because Frederick usually had a grand speech planned before he ever took the younger man out for an experiment. No such thing preceded this, and that made Abel worry. Someone wanted to see him **alone**.

That someone was a very familiar face. Comte Hannibal Lecter, a memory in Will's memory, glided through the door. This time, the Seekers that guarded it refused even the illusion of a private conversation and stood on the inside of the door. They always had to watch what they said, but this time their facial expressions, body language, etc. would be scrutinized as well. Many Seekers had a better grasp of the Game than Frederick did, which meant that caution was key. An errant expression or gesture could charge the conversation in unpredictable ways.

"Hello Seeker Gideon," his Lordship greeted and both of the guards stiffened. They didn't like being reminded of who he was before he was shoved in a cell.

"It's always nice to meet new people," Abel replied. "Frederick so rarely allows me the luxury."

“I am Comte Hannibal Lecter. I was informed that you were sharing space with Will? I was his mentor and sponsor.”

“I don’t believe that he's a good representative for yourself, Comte Lecter.”

The very dangerous visitor gave a minute tilt of the head and the smallest twitch of the lips. “That remains to be seen.”

He grinned. “Ever played Wicked Grace? I think you would be wonderful at it, a real wolf. No one would ever see you coming. It truly is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

Here goes the next step. “Of course, now that I know your name, I am aware of you by reputation. I can see why High Seeker Chilton both admires you and resents you, Come Lecter. Envy is a very powerful thing, and power itself is what he covets. A second son to a wealthy family. He would be worth nothing politically so he threw himself into the next best thing: religion. Yet, despite his machinations, esteem eludes him and follows you. He very much wants to be you.”

“He should be more careful what he wishes for.” The tone was teasing and light. Oh… this man, the Highwayman, had plans for Chilton. The thought pleased Gideon, who had suffered and lost himself at the hands of that man. For that revelation, he thought he should give his visitor a warning.

“You should have been more careful with Will. That young man has a bone to pick.”

“With me?” The voice was so carefully pruned to be incredulous that Gideon wouldn’t have caught the legitimate curiosity, had he not been in the know.

“Who’s to say.”

“I’ve always been more concerned about ways to overcome resistance, not build it up. It’s often made me a favorite among my vassals, and I find it works with my proteges as well.”

That made Gideon freeze slightly. When he had seen the situation that the elf, Will, was in, the first time that he had met Hannibal Lecter, he had felt tremendous sympathy for the young man. Here was someone that was going through the exact same thing that he was, although it could arguably be worse. Will wasn’t exactly someone who seemed capable of fighting against the person trying to warp him, but any goodwill that Abel had towards the young man evaporated when Will shot him. So, he had said and done nothing. When they met again, Abel took some solace in the fact that both he and Will may not have been far away from their tormentors, but they were slightly out of their reach. Frederick was far too afraid of him to actually try anything and Will had a fortress and iron bars separating him from his. This, however, proved that Hannibal Lecter was still playing, even with all that was between them.

“You’ve built up something,” he said staring at the other man, who seemed satisfied with the conversation. As he left and their watchers went looking for where Will ended up, Abel

thought about his next move. He didn't want to give anything to Chilton, but it seemed like Will needed more help to stop playing the Highwayman's game. He honestly hadn't expected the young man to be so open to murder and had the distinct feeling that Will wasn't playing around. Will might not like what he was going to do, but it was for his own good.

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The interaction with former Seeker Abel Gideon had been a success. The prisoner seemed to agree not to give him up for the time being and gave him a small bit of information about how Will felt. This, of course, revealed that Will had been lying to him to some degree during their previous interaction. It wasn't a pleasant revelation; he had hoped that their friendship really was on the mend. It seemed that some of the damage he had thought Frederick would do was already done. He would have to wait a bit longer to enact his plan. Will needed to be in the right headspace before they saw each other again without bars in between them. Hannibal wanted a friend that saw all of him and accepted him despite that, one that reveled in the darkness Hanibal had seen in him. If the young man was so angry and was just going to reject him then there was no point. He was not a stupid man and had survived this long without being caught. He valued himself much more than a relationship that might not even hold his attention forever, no matter how appealing it was at the moment.

Despite all of this, Hannibal was happy. He had the information and a more concrete timeline. He was always of the mindset that no news was the worst thing one could have; better to know the worst and see the dragon coming (so to speak). Also, he immensely enjoyed knowing how Will was doing. If anyone mentioned it, Hannibal would deny the smile that was on his face as he left. Naturally, because the thought came to him, someone did.

"I didn't know that you could look that happy," commented Freddie Lounds. "'Comte Lecter leaves the Bastion d'Argent looking like he just had the best sex of his life.' Considering that most of the capital knows where Messere Will is now, no one will be surprised. They also probably won't believe any other explanation."

Ah. He had hoped to ignore that coarse rumor. Usually it didn't bother him, but he was in a more precarious position than usual. After he arrived in Verchiel, Empress Celene I had come under fire for not violently putting down a small protest in the Alienage. Due to their friendship, many claimed that she had unnatural sympathies for the elves and, once again, claimed that she wasn't right for the position. Considering that Celene clawed her way to her position at the tender age of sixteen with dead parents and a competing cousin that despised her and then had held the throne for thirteen years, he didn't agree. This might cause her reputation to take another hit. Normally, he would allow it to play out, but Celene was cognizant enough of Hannibal's caution that she might take this as an active insult or some carelessness and make a move despite their friendship. The Game was often merciless to its players.

"How rude of you, Red Tattler."

She smirked, rapidly making notes in a small book. "Did you think I was above that sort of thing? You seem disappointed." She was wearing the tackiest outfit imaginable, red and purple clashing violently with her hair and complexion. He got the impression that the

vibrant colors were repeatedly dyed into the clothing so that the outfit didn't look worn (he could see the subtle differences), and that the colors were deliberately chosen to show wealth, both being expensive to make.

"Disappointment is the mechanism on which the Game survives, Madame Lounds. It is how we teach the newer players good manners, before they make us do something more drastic than stabbing them with a fork." That had been a memorable evening, and one he had been immensely amused by. They would call him ghastly for his cannibalism, but more than once he had seen a courtier killed by a dinner fork out of sight of prying eyes.

"It is a good thing that my position's allure allows me some reprieve." Only because she wasn't asked to attend the dinner portion.

"I am curious; What brings you here to the Bastion? The Seekers of Truth don't normally entertain bards." Her eyes flicked behind the mask she wore, the nose elongated to look like a fox's.

"Messere Will requested my presence." She said his name like it was a joke. "He wants an interview. Imagine that."

Will despised her. "I'm trying."

"It probably required a lot of effort to get **me** through the door. He must have the High Seeker wrapped around his fingers."

Abel Gideon had mentioned that Will wasn't entirely pleased with him. He was inviting Freddie Lounds to speak with him? What was he up to?

She flounced. "I shouldn't keep him waiting. Farewell Comte Lecter, we should speak again soon."

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His magic was free again, so Will knew it wasn't a fluke. It had taken his new 'friend' a couple of weeks to settle in as one of his rotating guards, but he had succeeded. Will had to prevent himself from flexing it outward, playing it along his senses. This connection to the Fade was such an intimate part of him, every moment without felt like he was being submerged in water, the world numb and muffled. Every second with it made him eternally grateful that he wasn't currently patrolling the Spire with a sunburst brand.

The door to his cell opened, and Gideon rolled over in his cot and snored; at his point, Will had learned which of Gideon's snores were faked and which were real. This time, he was not faking. The elf inside could barely make out a few words, the tail end of a spiel. "I will be right outside," the helmet said while Will tried to peer through and see the face beneath. They slid back out the door. He did want to solve that particular mystery, but he had all of the time in the world for that one. Taking care of Hannibal Lecter required an accelerated timeline. There was too much of a chance that he would hurt someone else, and Will? He was tired of losing people. His guard was tabled, and the elf turned his attention to his invited guest.

Freddie Lounds was dressed in the flashiest purple coat he had ever seen, complete with breeches made of maroon velveteen. Neither of these were really her colors (especially when set against her hair), and she wore her clothes like she knew this and didn't care. The bard had her ginger ringlets carefully pinned to her head with the aid of the fox mask she wore (he thought it was a bit on the nose). All-in-all, she appeared exactly as he expected her to. Freddie went to the wall and dragged over the chair that Chilton had taken to leaving in there. Apparently, he thought that pulling it from the wall was a power move, when Will clearly knew that he was hesitant to cut a visit short simply because his still-healing guts wouldn't let him stand for too long.

Placing the chair a decent middle ground away from being too close or too far from the bars to his actual cell. She plopped into the chair and kicked up her feet, relaxing into her seat and shoving her body language at him. It was clear to see that she desperately wanted him to think her totally relaxed and in power; Will didn't know if that came from fear or her posturing nature. It was impressive, considering that a murderer was also behind her. "It's good to see you again, Will." Beneath the lip of the mask, her lips smirked, the bloodstain of them sliding across her cheeks. "I should rephrase that. It is good to see you in here. Where you belong."

His body relaxed almost automatically, mirroring his posture and expression. "Thank you for coming. You answered my request a lot sooner than I was expecting."

She scanned his cell. "I was in the neighborhood." Her gaze flicked to his, and Will had to stop himself from flinching or looking away. Icy eyes took him in, searching for weaknesses. "So, it has come to my attention that Beverly Katz was murdered by the Highwayman." He didn't reply. "Am I wrong?"

"Don't play coy," he bit. "I am well aware that you were the one to call it in."

"And?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Snidely, she barked, "**You** don't want to talk about your friend that was killed. How about mine? Do you, in this little retreat of yours, ever think about Abigail Hobbs? Are you aware enough to reminisce on the girl you betrayed?"

"I mourn her," he declared. "I think about her every day."

A scoff. "You murdered her. I don't think you're allowed to grieve."

Freddie stared for an uncomfortably long amount of time after that. Her resentment poisoned the air and Will was about to request that she leave before he was reminded of why that was a bad idea. Much as he had problems with Madame Lounds, her services were something he could ill-afford to lose at the moment.

"Why am I here?" The interrogation began.

Will would have to choose his words carefully. Freddie wasn't going to believe the whole truth, but too much of a lie would have her scampering off to tattle. That's what she did best. "You have a wide readership."

"That was evident as soon as the Highwayman made himself known as a fan. Clearly, he thought I was important enough to get the first message regarding Seeker Katz."

He most certainly did **not** feel like going down this trail of thought, so Will tried to return to the original line of inquiry. "Well, I have an admirer and he seems to type to favor your work as well." She raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to elaborate. "The man who killed the Templar and the Grand Cleric."

"You think he admires you?" the Tattler asked, but she seemed to be biting his bait. The intrigue was there, he just needed to turn motivation into action.

"He killed the Templar to give me plausible deniability. When the Grand Cleric pushed for me to be made Tranquil instead of brought here, he killed her as well."

"And you think he followed you here?"

Will smirked. "You don't?"

"So you want me trying to do what exactly with your crazy fan?" she asked, perching on her seat, almost pitching forward.

He needed to make this correction so that she would be careful later. Ever since he learned that he was more or else on his own, Will had to learn to make and wear the appropriate mask for the correct occasion. It was such an Orlesian thing to do, think, and say that he almost rejected it on principle, but the role playing had gotten him this far. If Will was able to sense and even see motivations, then he had a potential weapon, a great boon. Why waste it? For Freddie, he wore the mask of the crazy person, the murderer. She wouldn't believe anything less. "I don't think anybody as careful as him could be crazy." She didn't flinch, but her eyebrows twitched. "A lot of people may believe that he's crazy, but that's only because he hasn't let people understand much about him." Almost without moving, her hands retrieved her board with parchment on it and attached inkstand. The quill came out and sat posed in her fingers.

"But you do," she proclaimed. "Are you trying to catch him or contact him?"

He leaned forward, magnetically brought to the action. "I would like to communicate with him, and you seemed to be the best way to do it. You are a bard after all, the best of Orlesian spies." Freddie preened, aware of the flattery's existence, but basking nevertheless. She rightly assumed that he wouldn't say anything like this under normal circumstances.

"I could help you," she smirked and smarmed.

"Your price?" he replied, hoping to pre-empt her being coy for the next half-hour and wasting more of his time. She hummed, tapping her forefingers to her chin in faux thought. The

action was slightly insulting, something about it breeding condescension. This was what he was going to have to put up with if he wanted to succeed.

“My price? I would like to write your story for you, tell your truth to the world,” her eye teeth flashed, aiding her very cat-like demeanor. “I would also like something only you can give me.”

“Me?”

Shrugging dismissively, Fredericka continued, “You. Last I heard, the famous Will, formerly of Clan Lavellan, was a Somniari. I’d like to take advantage of that. Dream-walk a little for me, give me some good information, and I’ll help you.”

“I can’t do those things. As far as Somniari go, I’m pretty weak.”

She sighed. “That’s disappointing.” She thought for a second before coming up with a new offer. “How about this? I bring you small trinkets and you dream with them. Tell me a little about them, and we’ll call it even.”

“I assume that you still want to write my story,” Will drawled.

“Of course.”

They hung at a stalemate, Will not thrilled about this deal, but knowing that he didn’t really have another choice. Her smirk grew by the minute and it only made him want to back out more and more, only held there by the knowledge that his rejection meant that he would get another chance. So, without much in the way of choices otherwise, Will shook hands with the infamous Red Tattler, deal struck.

Disaster hit shortly after when she slipped a note he had nearly forgotten about out of his shirt sleeve with an expression of immense triumph.

The elven mage hadn’t been sure what the bard’s goal was in taking back the small poem that Cole had gifted him. It was something he had been holding onto for comfort and had been debating whether he should have told Beverly what it meant to him. *Mala suledin nadas* . Now you must endure. Chilton hadn’t permitted him any books or paper just yet, something about him earning them one good day at a time, so there was no reason Will should have been able to keep it. When he had found it on his person after the journey was over Beverly had given him a knowing look and a smile, a small peace offering. No one else knew about it, and he had it when he woke up. Now, the Seekers were tossing his room in the hopes that they found something else he wasn’t allowed to have, anything to get him punished.

Any privileges taken away would only be for show and only for a night. Will had not broken his agreement with Chilton and therefore the man was obliged to hold his side of the bargain. A small part of him craved to have the piece of parchment back, but he was not willing to go to any extremes for something so paltry. The words were still stuck in the back of his mind; maybe he could ask for paper and ink before the words disappeared and then put them down from memory. That wouldn’t be enough, and Will knew it. It wasn’t so much about what the paper said as much as it was about what it represented: a piece of home thoughtfully given to

him by someone who believed in his innocence. Jack still had a hold of the Mabari figurine, maybe he could ask the man for that when they both weren't so beset by grief.

While they were tossing his room, he had been relocated back to his single cell, the one he had prior to Gideon. Without Gideon there accompanying him, the place felt desolate, an empty clearing in a busy forest. The clangs of metal scraping metal still sounded from outside. It was strange how someone he had only spoken to for a short time actually helped. Will hadn't realized how badly the isolation had affected him. His hands twitched with boredom, craving something to do. A spell lingered around in his mind, something small it whispered to him. A simple spell that wouldn't be complicated or require a lot of mana would feel so wonderful to do, but it would cause problems for him in the future. This was confirmation that Will had been stuck with his 'ally' among the Seekers. Will didn't realize how close the person was until he opened his eyes though and found himself looking directly into the slit off a Seeker/Templar helm. It was too heavily shadowed to see the eyes behind it, but the prisoner got the feeling he was being stared at and returned the gesture.

"Would you like a book, Messere Will?" From the tone of the Seeker's voice, Will received the distinct impression that he was smirking. He recognized the voice, usually the man spoke with a heavily lisp, but any trace of it was gone now.

"I'm fine, thank you," Will replied, trying not to appear too eager to finally converse with this person. "How much longer are they going to be inspecting my cell?"

"Shouldn't be too much longer. Don't worry." The man, at least that's what Will presumed, pulled out a small slip of parchment from the folds of his armor and quickly flashed some of the wording before returning it. It was the poem that Cole had given him. "I saved it for you."

Will wasn't quite sure what to say. The gesture was very thoughtful and a little kind, but the Seeker's behavior was so odd that it kept Will from completely believing it. So, all he said was: "Thank you."

The man lounged on the wall for a moment before he started circling the room, but Will refused to follow his movement even when he was in Will's blindspot and his sense of distance said that the man could probably reach through the bars to touch him. "I feel obligated to admit that I was listening in on the conversation between you and Fredericka Lounds, as well as many others. You are a very articulate man and I agree with a lot of what you said." His Seeker-guard flitted to the side of the cage, absorbing his reaction. He whispered, less like he was imparting a secret and more like he was sharing something intimate, "People don't understand much about me. Or you, for that matter. But at least we understand each other."

Now, the Seeker was at the front again, and he laid against the bars but still refrained from reaching through to him. "There's something we don't have or maybe we just never needed. You were right next to Jack Crawford the whole time and he never suspected a thing. That's talent. If you hadn't gotten sick, they would've never found you."

Will kept himself impassive, knowing that he was talking to a murderer that had killed for him. He wasn't sure how the man would take anything perceived as rejection. "You've hidden well yourself. I don't see anyone suspicious of you."

“Oh, but you’re a mage. By default our kind are supposed to suspect you, but everyone left you alone. You’d be surprised what Seekers and Templars are allowed to get away with.” He pushed off of the bars, and removed his helm in one swift motion, revealing the face underneath. By giving Will this, he was purposefully allowing Will the ability to identify him later, giving Will a vulnerability to use against him should Will so choose. “Besides, I am fairly plain looking; you’d stand out wherever you went.”

The imprisoned elf wasn’t sure that he would call his admirer plain-looking. He had a strange look of a predator while managing to appear like everyone else. There was a sense of forced normality to his entire being. He was also fairly handsome. Will assumed that the comment about standing out was in reference to his being an elf. “You killed that Templar while they were determining my fate.”

The Seeker looked grieved for a moment before the mask of familiarity and geniality came back. “I thought that it might allow you some freedom. I had read your file often enough that it was easy to recreate your work.” He smiled a little dreamily. “It was **so** specific. At the time, I didn’t know you were a Somniari and that they could use the death against you.“ That was odd. Did they not put his status in the file?

“And the Grand Cleric?”

“I wish it could have been me,” the Seeker grinned sheepishly. “It was someone else.” The candor was surprising. The young man could have claimed them both, and Will would have accepted it; it wasn’t like he ever got a description of the Grand Cleric’s body. There had been a suspicion that the bodies belonged to Hannibal, but the way they were killed had made him think it wasn’t the case. With confirmation on one and denial on the other, Will was nearly positive that Hannibal had killed the Grand Cleric. Just another name to add to his own body count.

“We’re done,” came a voice echoing down the hall. Peeking out of the door, his admirer turned back to him and shrugged. “Looks like I can take you back now, Messere Will.”

Will affected a small smile, trying to appear friendly. He turned his back to the door and held out his hands for them to be cuffed. “Just call me Will. I don’t believe I caught your name Messere?”

“If you won’t be called Messere, then neither will I. I’m Matthieu.” With a swift gesture, Matthieu opened the door to his cell, not bothering with the manacles. He stood aside. Will wasn’t entirely sure what his admirer’s game was, but the young Seeker did not rush him nor assault him. Instead, he simply watched as the elf took a few tentative steps out of the cell before he glimpsed the amazement and worship on Matthieu’s face. This would be what would help him escape the cycle that Lecter was perpetuating. His revenge and justice would be soon, so he needed to play into what the other man wanted of him. Pushing away any misgivings about the situation, he poured confidence into each subsequent step. He straightened his back and tried to pull his spine up to appear taller (which was difficult as he was half a head or a little more shorter than the Seeker).

With an ease to his demeanor that Will did not actually possess, he evaluated the room, observing the reaction it garnered him. Matthieu was not shy about his awe. Cavalier, he

crossed his arms behind his back and held them out. The hands that grasped his arms were reverent, even as they put him in shackles. Will was glad the other man couldn't see his face, else his discomfort and general apprehension was noticed. He was sure it was smeared there. With one hand moving up his lower back to between his shoulder blades and the other sitting on the bridge made by his cuffs, Will was guided out into the hall and back the way he came. While they walked, he dared to ask, "Why were you trying to help me?"

The hand on his chain tightened, but it wasn't demanding or painful. More likely, the reaction had been involuntary, which Will couldn't decide if he was comforted by or not. "In this world, too many times have I seen predators run out of their dens by prey. Even those in power must yield to those with the greater numbers. We're hawks, you and I, and you've lost your roost. Why not come share mine?"

"Hawks are solitary." Here, the admirer was speaking of the sacred animal of Andruil and it couldn't have felt more appropriate. If there was a sign from the Creators that this was the course of action he should carry, this was it. May the Goddess of the Hunt aid him in this. Andruil enansal.

"That's their weakness.," Matthieu replied. "Imagine if the hawks started working together." They stopped, having arrived at his cell. The door had kindly been left open by the Seekers that had ransacked it, so they didn't have to awkwardly try and get inside with just the two of them (while still looking like Matthieu had actually been rough with him to those down the corridor). From there, they did the usual routine, get inside, quick pat down, uncuff, etc. Meanwhile, the little hawk's voice whispered in his ear, "Why did you want to talk to me?"

"I need a favor," escaped his mouth before he could reconsider, take it back. Will didn't hear Gideon snoring, but that didn't matter. At this moment in time, there shouldn't be any reason for the other prisoner to protest.

Matthieu smiled. "I'm always happy to do a favor for a friend." His voice was soft, and Will thought about how that gentility might serve when he killed his victims. If he did this, if he did this…

They stood apart from each other, Will firmly inside his cell and Matthieu out of it. This was the moment of his damnation. He could choose to not say the words, take it back his request, or make something else up. His mind screamed that this was crossing a line, but he shoved it to the side. This was justice. If he didn't do this now, then any future kills, anyone else that died at the hands of Hannibal Lecter, would be on his hands too. "I want you to kill Comte Hannibal Lecter."

Matthieu beamed at him and left the room. What had he done? His stomach flopped around; he might vomit. Will had just condemned someone to die, had gotten them killed surely as he had put his own hands around their throat. He had put a hit on the Comte and there was no going back from that. It was just as well. What's done was done. He had put it out there in the world, and the righteous fury that scoured his veins would make sure that a killer, whether it was Hannibal or Matthieu was gone from this world. If no one died, then he simply hadn't succeeded, but there would always be another chance. A muted part of him asked if another chance was really what he wanted. Will didn't have an answer.

He didn't know how long he was left with his thoughts after that. Abel Gideon was awake and watched him carefully for a while, eyes flickering in the blue light. Ultimately, Will decided to ignore him in favor of addressing the prickling sensation building beneath his skin. It reminded him of when you see a spider out of the corner of your eye, but you turn away and it's gone. He was left with the feeling of its long legs crawling on his back and head where it wouldn't be obvious, the phantom brush on his neck where he would be vulnerable. Oftentimes, it was the awareness of every inch of your own body manifesting perceptions of the creature that created the anxiety submerged beneath. You may not know that the spider is there, but you **know** it is, and that mere fact signals the instinct of flight or fight… or the little thought of reaction. Freeze. That was what he was doing right now.

Much as he wished for something to change, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Will knew that he could call out right now, bring a guard running, maybe even take his words back from Matthieu's ears. He could tell someone what happened and they could prevent the unthinkable from happening. The elf opened his mouth, but no sound came out. What was done was done. The thoughts billowed inside of his head, reminders of what exactly he had just done. Voices whispered in his ear, telling him that they could help, get him out of there. Some were encouraging his rage, trying to stoke it, but he wasn't holding on to that anymore. Surely, he would feel it later, but at that moment he was numb. The moment that Matthieu had shut the door of the cell, all thoughts had fled. His body was a mess of external stimuli playing along his skin, so present that he couldn't comprehend the sources; his mind shut down and floated by. He was a bundle of skin and nerves.

That was, until the pain set in. They were soft points at first, pinpricks accompanying the rest of the pins and needles. Then, they got stronger and stronger. The pressure grew, drawing his attention to them and shrinking down his world to those increasingly excruciating loci. His musings screeched as whatever they were erupted from his back and his trance broke. Desperate hands were scrabbling at his shirt, feeling under the tatters to investigate the prongs protruding through his back. Will's breathing grew faster and faster, trying to intake as much air as he could as if it would soothe the agony. Once he started, he couldn't stop. Dizziness set in and he tipped forward off of the cot, one hand stretching out only to smack against the wall.

He opened his eyes, still hyperventilating, while he laid down on the floor. Pupils, expanded in panic, stared at the ceiling while he absently registered the real world. His back was flat against the gritty stone, the only protrusions coming from tiny rocks that had stuck to his back in the fall. The small sounds of metal greaves clashing as legs ran towards his cell brought sound back to his world, something he hadn't realized he had lost. Each clue prompted him to recall where he was and why. The distant wall of mute noise that had encompassed his existence mere moments ago was not completely gone, but was receding. His head was clear enough that a turn showed him a recognizable face: Alana Bloom.

Will glanced beyond her to see Abel Gideon laying in bed, a soft snore creeping through the chamber. It was morning. He doubted that the ex-Seeker was actually asleep, but appreciated the concession his pretending gave. For now, Will was being allowed his vulnerability without ridicule. Will had been playing the game around Alana, but didn't really have the energy for it right now and their previous encounters had also included Hannibal. That wouldn't, shouldn't, be much of a factor any longer.

“Are you okay?” she breathlessly asked and he struggled to sit up. Her hand reached through the bars and placed itself on his shoulder, a bit of the outside allowed in. Normally, that would have been avoided due to his status, but she was grounding him so neither pulled away. He finished the movement, more difficult thanks to strangely sore muscles and their point of contact ended.

“I’m alright,” he tried to assure her, but the Seeker’s dubious look made it clear that she didn’t buy it. “Really. I just had a nightmare. The whole thing with Beverly… it’s still bothering me.” Will shifted, trying to get comfortable on the stone floor. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to make it to the bed. “I haven’t seen you in so long. What brings you here now?”

Alana flinched and Will became aware of his unintentional bite. He was, of course, aware that those words came from his actual thoughts on their interactions. She had already been avoiding him when he was at the White Spire and then they weren’t even in the same city for over a month. “I just…” She sighed, and he could see her reordering her thoughts on her face. “You. I noticed that the Red Tattler had an invite to come and speak with you. I thought you despised her. It just seemed…”

“Suspicious?” he asked, still too drunk on the absence of fear to be more cautious.

“Uncharacteristic is the word I’d choose. And slightly worrying.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.” It sounded more aggressive in his head than aloud; in the air and vibrations of sound it only sounded tired.

“You’ve gone through so much, Will. I’m going to worry; worrying is who I am.” She hesitated. “With everything that’s happened, I don’t want you to lose sight of who you are.”

“I haven’t, Alana. If anything, I’m coming into focus.”

Alana took a deep breath; were those tears in the corners of her eyes? “I know you feel powerless about what happened to Beverly and you want to do something about it.”

“Would that be so bad?” he asked and instantly regretted it. Too loose with his words. Now that he was trying to get a grip, Will knew why telling someone was a bad idea. They would still be suspicious of him, perhaps even more so, because he put the hit out in the first place. No, in this endeavor he was alone and trying to take it back would accomplish less than nothing.

“I suppose it depends on what you’re thinking about doing,” Alana supplied. “I’m still trying to come to grips with what happened. There is no solution to grief. It just is.”

“Beverly died because of me,” he whispered. “I won’t let it happen again.”

Her eyes went impossibly wide and her mouth opened to speak. The door for the chamber opened instead and several Seekers walked through in full armor. None of them were paying attention to anything being said, only gesturing and ordering Will to come with them. “Will!” Alana called out and he turned back once they got him out of his cell. “What have you done, Will?”

They stared into each other's eyes. "What I had to do," Will said softly, still loud enough for her to hear and her alone. It was as close to an apology for this as he would ever give.

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"Seeker Bloom!" a familiar voice called out to her and she looked away from Will's wary eyes to another blue set. Abel Gideon was peering out from Will's sister cell, apparently no longer content to sleep (or pretend to sleep as Alana now suspected). "Do you mind if I speak with you for a moment?" Will started to stay something, but was quickly dragged out by one of the Seekers and by Frederick. She gave a questioning look to the High Seeker.

"Oh, go on. He won't bite." The man smirked. "Much. I just need to run some tests with Messere Will here." Then, he sauntered out of the room, seeming enormously pleased with himself. Alana pleaded with Jimmy and Brian, both of whom were still outside, to go with Will. Their eyes agreed that they weren't sure how to feel with Chilton having his greedy hands on their former comrade and followed the group heading wherever Chilton conducted his tests.

The brunette woman turned to the man in the cage. He had called her Seeker Bloom, the armor she wore showing that she was a member of the Order, novice though she was. Yes, Gideon was a victim, but he did still kill people. She was going to have to live up to her new organization in this conversation. "You wish to speak to me, Seeker Gideon."

"Please," he offered with a smile. "While the title may have been appropriate during our previous interactions, now you are far more of a Seeker than I, although I suspect you haven't gone through the Vigil yet."

"I'm still just a novice."

"Seeker-in-training. It is good to see you, Seeker Bloom. The armor serves you well and brings out the fierceness and color of your eyes, even in the dank gloom of this place. Like a flower blossoming amongst the weeds."

She shuffled in place, a little taken aback by the flattery. "Glad to see you alive, Messere Gideon."

"Abel. And I'm glad to be alive as well. Messere Will didn't do a particular good job at trying to kill me, but he was sick and a very poor shot."

Alana gave a weak grin that probably came across as insincere. "We were grateful that you weren't able to hurt anymore people."

"I am sincerely grateful as well. I understand that the late young Lady Hobbs is a bit of a sore point with Messere Will."

"Me as well," she shot and he seemed slightly taken aback.

"My apologies, I didn't know that you were close with her," he replied and Alana was surprised that he read as genuine, especially considering the theatricality of every moment

spent with him since Will's accompaniment left. "Another thing to add to the list. Despite evidence to the contrary, I do have to admire Messere Will."

The young Seeker studied the man in the cell. "I have been wondering about that night. How did you know about Abigail and where to find her?"

Abel Gideon's attempt at an enigmatic smile left goosebumps on her skin. "I was in the neighborhood. In all honesty, I was looking for you, but she appeared out of thin air at the place you were supposed to be. I was struck by her likeness to you at that age, that was roughly when we met each other after all." Alana did not like being reminded that Abel Gideon was a former suitor nor that her parents had been anticipating marriage for her when she had been Abigail's age.

"And how did you know where I lived?"

His smile sliced his face wider. "A little birdie tweeted in my ear."

"And why would a little birdie tweet that?" she prodded. Her own gift of interrogation was still developing, but she had a few tricks left from her days at court.

His voice was light and airy when he replied, "I imagine said birdie wanted me to kill you or wanted Will to have reason to kill me. Either way, you and I are equally expendable."

She slowly said, "If I was the specified target, I imagine the little birdie wouldn't have been too happy should you have gone after Abigail instead."

"Too bad for the little birdie."

A puzzle was trying to piece itself together. Alana had always been one to start with the border and work her way in, the outline was the best way to see the shape of the thing. At the moment, the initiate Seeker of Truth felt like she just had the corners. If she wanted to get anywhere, she needed to connect them together to create a cohesive border and the barest hint of colors for the organization of her piece placement later. "Frederick, Will, and you were all missing for an extended amount of time, but no one knows exactly what happened. High Seeker Chilton was delirious with pain, and Will was so sick that all of his memories of the events are blurry and fragmented at best." She paused, allowing him to see where she was going. "We all were sure that you were trying to find the Highwayman that night. Your murders were invitations to your own little party. Did you?"

Gideon had the audacity to look almost proud. "We may have been separated for a time, but I believe what I truly found that night was Messere Will."

"Will's not the Highwayman," she dismissed.

"Not yet," Abel pronounced, each word dripping slowly like molasses. "We are the sum of our experiences; people come into this world as clay and we are shaped by the Maker's hand. Each moment, for good or for ill, are the tools that he uses to form us." He turned, elongating his form against the harsh blue glow of the manastones. "The thing about clay is that enough force can smash it and force it to become a shape that is utterly unrecognizable from before.

How much has to happen to change our shapes, who we are? Much has happened to Will, and the traumatic is a force to be reckoned with. He is a changed man."

"He mentioned feeling responsible for Beverly's death. If he feels that way about something so beyond his control, perhaps he has felt that way about the Copy murders and simply hasn't said. Perhaps he is looking for some sort of personal redemption."

The prisoner laughed in her face, but it sounded wrong. It wasn't bitter, angry, or even sad, but carried through the cell without humor. Each pulse churned her insides. "Redemption? Of course not. Redemption is beyond his reach, prevented by the bars that hold him in this room. He's not interested in that, but revenge. Revenge is a trinket he can value."

"Revenge? Why? Against who?" she demanded, but even as she spoke the words, the answer came. "He thinks he knows who killed Beverly," she whispered, horrified at what that probably meant. When she first learned of Beverly's death, it had caused anger to boil up in her. Her every resentment at the Seekers and at the Highwayman made her want to scream and rampage, but she had enough self-control to reign it in. For Will, with all that had happened and how his relationship with Beverly had just been repaired, it probably raged in him greater than the waves of the ocean.

Former Seeker Abel Gideon cocked his head at her, watching her expressions curiously. His eyes flicked back and forth, but it was difficult to read his meaning in them in the dim light. He spoke: "You have always been kind Alana. I knew that during our brief engagement and in every moment we've spoken since. For your courtesy and in the name of our past dealings, I will give you a gift. Consider it a parting token; I will let you save Will from himself."

"How?" she asked in a hushed tone. The breath hissed as she uttered the word and echoed through the chamber.

"Will is trying to put someone on the pyre, and, if he is not careful, it will be himself. It is your choice whether you will hold him back, allow him to burn, or give him the sword of mercy. The rage would have him lunge for the throat, but it will pass. When it does, he will either be a murderer or he will not. It's up to you." Finally, Alana could read it: regret. Gideon's words held notes of regret bleeding through them. It was so strange; in all the time that she had known him, she never thought of him as a man that would regret anything.

"You say that he is not in a position to grasp at redemption; why would vengeance be anymore within his reach?" she asked, hoping to ascertain Gideon's exact intentions. What had driven him to this conversation?

"Little birdies travel far, Seeker Bloom, and it helps when we have someone willing to extend our reach. If only he had a friend, a birdie who could tweet murder into a sympathetic ear."

The floor dropped out from under her and she remembered Fredericka Lounds. Why had the woman been there? Will hadn't said. "Who does he want to kill?"

As soon as Abel Gideon told her the answer, Alana dashed out of the room, almost faster than the guards that were letting her out could open the door. She kept running until she found the one person that she knew would be able to help her rescue Hannibal: Jack Crawford. Even

luckier for her, Brian and Jimmy were with him. She explained the situation as quickly as she could and they were off.

Jack looked dead on his feet from the lack of sleep, but immediately charged into action. They found the freshest horses that they could, because they would need to make it there in the fastest amount they could manage and that meant the horses would need to be pushed to their limits. This was an emergency. A message was sent to a Chantry-affiliated stablemaster in Verchiel explaining the situation and they were given some coin to facilitate the care of the horses. They had a plan in place. They would find Hannibal, and Brian was primed with medicine, bandages, etc. It also meant that Brian would need to follow a pace behind in case they were attacked, so that no one would immediately go after the healer (as was most enemies were wont).

The first step already dashed it into pieces. They couldn't find Hannibal at his home, which means that he was very likely already taken. They poured through every document in his study until one of the servants informed them that Hannibal had gone to the spa. Jack had to be pushed out because he was wondering if he should check on Bella, but this was more urgent.

They ran. A life was at stake.

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Hannibal awoke with his neck straining towards the ceiling, throat rubbed raw by tough rope. As he jerked, the world began to shift and he righted himself. He leaned left, then right, shifting his weight as much as the rope allowed. It revealed that he was currently balancing precariously on a board, both feet spread to either end. It seemed to be sitting atop something fairly small and unstable. Pain was racketing his body, and Hannibal noticed that his femoral arteries had been cut, not deeply, but they were nonetheless. His arms were bound back, behind his body, and at points which did not allow him any room for movement. Pain was lacerating up his shoulders from the strain on them placed by the arm bindings and from being hung by his neck.

He glanced around. Hannibal had been enjoying the local spa. After all of the work he had been putting into his project, some time just for him seemed appropriate. Verchiel didn't have nearly the luxuries of the ones in Val Royeaux or halamshiral, but it was adequate. Duke Gaspard de Chalons was not known for his encouragement of the arts or of luxuries. Lord Froideveaux's frivolous nature often confounded him, because he didn't believe that such a man as Duke Gaspard, chevalier and warmonger that he was, would even remotely entertain someone like Lord Froideveaux. Hannibal had been enjoying the steam room when a cloying smell hit the air and it was one he immediately recognized: deathroot. Someone was trying to disable him. He searched wildly for the source, but vertigo was hitting him the longer he breathed in the poisoned air. He held out for maybe a minute taking in just enough air to keep him going, before he had inhaled too much and went down.

And this was where he had ended up. The marble walls of the interior space he was in suggested that they hadn't gone far; it still appeared to be the spa.

“Good!” exclaimed the smirking face of his kidnapper and potential killer. It was surprising that someone had actually managed to catch him off-guard in such a manner, but the person before him was so unremarkable that he felt a little insulted. Although, perhaps that was the point. “It is common practice in Orlais that traitors be hanged until dead, but…” He tapped the board swaying back and forth with Hannibal’s shifting balance. “I thought you’d need a little help. The whole point of bringing you here was to punish you for your crimes, but if you have any sort of integrity then you’ll accept the punishment that has been decided for you.” The young man shrugged. “Even as you are a bastard. There’s another reason of course, but I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Hannibal wasn’t impressed. They stared at each other for several long moments, before his captor grinned. “Wonderful. I was hoping you’d say no. Now I get to watch you struggle to stay up, even as your limbs fail you. I learned from practice that the cut I gave you could kill you anywhere between five minutes to a whole hour. I wonder how long you’ll last or if you’ll give up long before then. You could even kick away what I’ve given you and it’d all be over. It’s a choice. Life is about choices. Good and bad.”

The noble’s eyes saw the barest hint of a breastplate in his periphery, the emblem of the Seekers of Truth proudly displayed. “You’re a Seeker. This doesn’t seem to follow your usual motivations.” He sucked in a breath as another laceration of pain shot through his leg. He wobbled. “Are you Will’s admirer?”

Bared teeth glinted at him with the last bits of sunlight eking in from the windows. “We have a mutual respect.”

“He’s not what you think. He’s not a murderer.” Hannibal had tried often enough to get him to murder, but the young man had struggled with killing others. The best his Lordship had gotten was Garrett Hobbs and aiding in the mercy killing of the mage Laurence.

“I thought as much, and I don’t care. At the very least, he is now.” The Seeker made a little flourish with his hand and a quarter bow. “By proxy.”

“He asked you to do this?” Hannibal spoke in a raspy voice.

The young man beamed. “What are friends for?”

All of his work and it was this young man that would facilitate Will’s transition. It was a bitter tablet to swallow. He also was a little resentful that Will wouldn’t wait and try it with his bare hands later, but he supposed it was a little desperate. That didn’t make it sting any less.

“Now, I’m going to ask you a few yes or no questions while you still have enough blood coursing through your brain to answer them. Ready?” He spoke in a bored tone, almost dragging one word into the next,, but Hannibal could read his eagerness behind it.

“Ready,” he agreed.

His would-be-killer got close to his face, enough so that, had Hannibal been a lesser man, he might’ve spit in his eye. The Seeker whispered, “Did you kill that judge?”

Hannibal said nothing.

That seemed to answer it for the young man, judging by the way that he bounced. It also told him that Will suspected as much as well, if he had an inkling of who the young elf sent him to kill. “It’s all right, you don’t have to incriminate yourself. As long as I ask yes or no questions, you don’t have to admit anything aloud. Specific mental efforts can force the pupil to dilate. If you dilate it, that’s a yes. No dilation means no. Understood?” He didn’t wait for a response before he leaned in even closer, staring directly into Hannibal’s eyes. “Are you the Highwayman?”

Hannibal thought for a moment about not bothering, but this would go one of two ways. Either Hannibal would be dead and him telling this man would ultimately mean nothing for him, or his potential murderer would be by someone that came looking. If he wasn’t, that would be something that could be dealt with later. So, he dilated his eyes.

The Seeker pulled back, confidence and triumph in every step. “Look at you. The Highwayman brought low. I thought as much; it was the other reason for the noose. Only fitting for you to be given a highwayman’s execution.” He hummed and did a small shuffle-dance on the floor, while Hannibal grew slightly drowsy. “I wonder what they’ll call me. I have no idea if it’s true, but it’s said that the Chasind eat their enemies to take their strength and appeal to their gods. Maybe your murders will become my murders as I appease mine. I’ll be the Highwayman now.” He punctuated the speech by throwing out his arms, spreading them wide and taking a bow.

Hannibal gave the Seeker a nobleman’s sneer, which the young man recognized for what it was. “Only if you eat me.” Even as he said it, his eyes struggled to stay open.

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Abel Gideon was silent as the grave, as was Will. he didn’t know what happened after he was taken away, but he had a feeling it wasn’t good. The damp in the room was suffocating. Drops of water from the ceiling hit his face, freezing the spots where they landed. His thoughts lingered on each one, feeling them slide down his cheek to his neck, and then the inevitable tumble to the bed. At this point, whatever was done was done. No one was going to come to them for the rest of the night, so no one was going to be told of the words Will had whispered into one of his Seeker-guard’s ears.

Another drop landed on his nose. Will felt another and another. They were coming faster now.

“Looks like it’s raining,” said Gideon, but Will didn’t bother replying.

They were steady, coming in a rhythm. His heart beat with them, a pounding that gradually relaxed. There was nothing more that he could do. One man could die, two men could die, no one would die. Tomorrow he would find out, but he would be stuck waiting until then.

Another drop fell in his eye and crimson exploded across his vision. Will didn’t move, but he didn’t watch the little droplets of liquid more closely. Through the red haze, they looked like

blood. A shower of it was clinging to the stone ceiling above him and dripping down. He hoped the waiting would be over soon.

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The group ventured into the spa cautiously, anticipating a murderer around every corner. Alana was nervous about how this was going to go down, much of her experience so far had been investigative. All of her combat training had been just that, training. Brian and Jimmy hung back so that Brian would be protected and that the healer wouldn't be in the midst of the fight. It bothered Brian, but that's what he got for being the one most competent with medicine among them. Alana and Jack moved through the back room, the steam rising around them smelled like it was tinged with blood, although that may have been Alana's imagination. Another door, forward momentum. Then, they saw Hannibal.

He was hanging from the ceiling, toes touching the wood of a balancing board and trying to keep himself aloft as it swished back and forth. His arms were tied behind him and blood was pouring down his legs, making his feet sleep. He saw them, the attacker was too busy monologuing.

"Jack!" Hannibal cried, and Brian peered around despite the plan and took a quick shot with his crossbow. Alana scowled at him, but rushed forward, sword and shield ready. Jack shot her a look and rushed to Hannibal. The man fell and kicked out, sending the board flying away and Hannibal's weight dropped. The height was low enough that it only sent him spinning out of control and did not break his neck. Jack grabbed him and kept him up while Alana finished her charge.

As the other Seeker got back up and scrambled to ready his own weapon, she crashed into him, shield first. He went tumbling back and she kicked him to disrupt the motion. Behind her, Alana heard Jack yelling for Brian and Jimmy to get in and help them, but Alana only felt rage. It was like all of the grief she had felt since Beverly died, since beforehand when Will was taken away, was bleeding out of her. Masking all other noise was the sound of her heart in her ears. The false Seeker tried to get up once again and she stomped down, right next to where the arrow was sticking out of him. He screamed.

She raised her sword, ready to strike the final blow, but before the tip even touched him she stopped. He stared at her as she held her sword-point right above his heart, breathing heavily, hair and eyes probably wild. Jack placed an arm on her shoulders and she stepped back and turned away. Jack swiftly knocked him out and turned to her, a question in his eyes. Alana waved him off, not interested in talking. Instead, she walked over to the barely conscious Hannibal and sat by him as Brian stabilized his condition.

Her mind echoed with the reminder that someone she had once considered a friend had done this. The person that had convinced her that her life was worth living her way and that her parents didn't always know best was lying nearly dead because of someone she had defended. It hurt, the ache piercing rational thought. Now, all she could think was how tired she was. Sleep seemed like the right idea.

Chapter End Notes

Andruil enansal: Blessings of Andruil the Huntress/Blessings of the Lady of Fortune.

Vallasdahlen

Chapter Summary

> "You are required to do nothing, least of all believe. Shut one's eyes tight or open one's arms wide, either way, one's a fool." -Flemeth, Dragon Age: Origins
>
> Alternatively:
> "I don't know what to believe."
> "A statement that possesses more wisdom than it implies."
> -The Warden and Flemeth, Dragon Age: Origins

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
> Vallasdahlen: Literally 'blood forest' or 'forest of blood'. It is a reference to the trees that were planted in remembrance to all of the warriors that fell protecting the Dalish people, back when they actually controlled the Dales.
>
> So this chapter was a long time coming. I know I've been away for about two months, but I needed to protect my headspace for a little while and was struggling. Since then, I've been trying to play catch up on all of the chapters I've missed. For this next bit, I'm planning on posting once a week until I've completely caught up, which should be through book two and maybe a little into book three. I've finished chapter seven and eight, so it should be possible for the next two weeks at the very least. I am still planning to re-edit Vir Assan and fix up the stuff I've messed up lore and grammar wise, but I want to catch up first. I know no one is asking, but I am planning to do a book four and five, which will involve more Dragon Age stuff. Book Five is planned to take place during Dragon Age: Inquisition, but I'm hoping to explain things well enough that experience with the game is not required.

Jack had to convince High Seeker Chiton that they should have the body. The man was obsessed with the idea that, for some reason, there was more evidence to be found on her and was loath to return her to them. After some good old fashioned debating, their senior was able to get Beverly back, but the team would be required to prepare everything for the funeral themselves. So, they did. It was hard work, getting the pyre ready for a whole human-shaped body to lay on it, but all of them were dedicated to the task. They wanted to give their friend a proper Andrastian funeral; it was what she deserved.

After several hours of stacking the wood, coating it in flammables, and painstakingly preparing her body, they brought her out to the pyre. Jack had contacted the Katz family back in Halamshiral to double check with them on if it was okay that they were giving her their funeral (and to offer his sincerest condolences), and they gave permission for it to take place. The whole affair was done within only a few short days; they didn't want to wait too long and jeopardize Beverly's journey through the Fade or chance a demon possessing her corpse.

The family's only request was that she be burned with a cedar branch. Alana didn't understand the practice herself, but something made it seem like one that was wholly elven. For a split second, she thought to ask Will… but then she remembered what he had done and barred it from her thoughts.

They brought her out clad only in a white sheet, well-treated and shimmering in the sun, unlike the one that had been used by the Highwayman to give Beverly some dignity. Her entire body was wrapped and the branch secured in the folds of cloth. Jack swallowed and sighed, tired beyond even his years. Alana could certainly relate. Jimmy and Brian were beside each other, trying to give comfort in the face of death. She heard one of them ask if they should have gotten permission for Will to be there with them, and privately shook her head. Behind them were all those that wished to attend, paying their respects and acknowledging the right of those before Beverly to grieve her first. A Mother strode towards the pyre, escorted by the uncharacteristically solemn High Seeker Frederick. She daintily held her robes and stood before the departed, a bulwark between her and the gathered mourners.

Alana had never had to guide a funeral before, but she had seen plenty.

"Now is the time to take solace in each other and the Maker. He has brought Seeker Beverly Katz home to his side and she will dwell with him knowing no fear or pain. With this, we send her off much like our Blessed Andraste. I will save the lamentation for those closest." Here, the Mother looked to them, nodding to each in turn. "I feel it is more appropriate to use words that give strength.

"O Maker, hear my cry: Guide me through the blackest nights.Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked. Make me to rest in the warmest places. O Creator, see me kneel: For I walk only where You would bid me. Stand only in places You have blessed. Sing only the words You place in my throat. My Maker, know my heart: Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain. Judge me worthy of Your endless pride. My Creator, judge me whole: Find me well within Your grace. Touch me with fire that I be cleansed. Tell me I have sung to Your approval."

The Mother lifted the torch and set the oil soaked cloth ablaze.

"O Maker, hear my cry: Seat me by Your side in death. Make me one within Your glory. And let the world once more see Your favor. For You are the fire at the heart of the world, And comfort is only Yours to give."

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After Jack Crawford had learned that Will had attempted to kill Hannibal Lecter (regardless of the existence of a proxy), he had been conflicted. His instincts had been telling him throughout this whole thing that something was off, that Will was innocent. Even if he had committed the murders with his hands, it never happened with his mind. Perhaps he had been misled by the young man, but Will was the kind of person that held this strange and alien compassion, probably stemming from his empathy. As far as Jack was concerned, the young man had only ever killed two people: Garrett Hobbs and the mage Laurence. Even with Laurence, Jack had been the one to deliver the final blow, because the young man couldn't bring himself to. Jack only counted it, because he had participated in the battle with the influenced man and the desire demon. Both of those men were knowingly murderers.

So, when Will tried to actually kill someone and was desperate enough to employ another murderer to do so, Jack took notice. Whatever he might think of the Comte privately, Will apparently believed the man was the Highwayman so strongly that he would descend into such savage behavior. It was worth it to come and speak with the young man himself.

Will was alone when Jack arrived, as the Seeker had requested. He knew about Gideon and was loathe to hear the man's running commentary on their discussion, nor did he relish the idea of the ex-Seeker knowing where his head was at. He hadn't even told his team. This… this needed to be between Will and Jack.

Will greeted him with the words, "Jack. I can tell that something's on your mind. It is spilling over like water in a brimming cup about to overfill."

"It doesn't take a spirit from the Fade or near magical empathy to be able to tell that I'm preoccupied," Jack shot and Will smirked. He didn't say anything though, which Jack took as his contribution for the moment. "Comte Hannibal Lecter was almost murdered by a Seeker of Truth, specifically one of the ones assigned to guard you. We both know that Seekers can't be possessed and their minds cannot be controlled through magical means, so I'm curious what might have happened for this man to turn so suddenly."

Will raised an eyebrow.

"We also believe that this man killed the Templar and the Grand Cleric that was vying for your Tranquility."

"He killed the Templar, not the Grand Cleric. I have reason to believe that's the Highwayman." The elf cocked his head, birdlike. "But you already suspected that."

"Suspecting something is not the same as knowing. How do you know?" Jack asked. The answer seemed obvious, but he wanted the young man to say it. He needed to understand every step of how this happened and what caused Will to move in the manner that he had.

"He told me," the elf replied, not remotely apologetic.

Jack gave his conclusion, "And then you told him to kill Comte Lec-"

"**Nothing** I said made that happen," Will stated, the skin between his eyes scrunching. He was still oozing a cool air with a tinge of mischief, but the facade might have been cracking.

“It just happened,” was enunciated, each word almost echoing off the stone walls for how loudly they were proclaimed.

Snorting, the Seeker replied, “You don’t especially seem too broken up about it. He was your former sponsor, and you’re not the least bit worried.”

“When I found myself in here, I uttered these words to the air after he left. ‘May the Dread Wolf take you.’ For my people it is a curse. A condemnation. Fen’harel is the trickster god and he brings misfortune to those not wary of him.” It broke open, if only for a moment, and Jack saw righteous anger. Will truly believed that Hannibal was someone that had done all of those horrible things.

“You hold contempt for him.”

Laughing mirthlessly, Will corrected him, “I have contempt for the Highwayman, what he does and what he stands for.” He was equating them. Jack noted that for later.

“And what, exactly, would that be Will?”

He snarled, “What does he do? What is the very **first** and **principal** thing that he does, the need that he serves by killing?”

“He harvests organs.”

“No. That’s only the action of what he does and not what I asked. **Why** does he need to do it?” Before Jack could answer, Will kept going. “He kills in sounders of three or four, quickly. He can’t afford for too much time to pass between them. Do you know why?” He gave a coy smile laced with disdain. “I know why.”

The last time they spoke together about the Highwayman, Will had been reluctant. He told Jack that he had needed to make his own connections to the Highwayman, but Jack could see past his shell. The mage had grown impatient waiting for Jack to solve the mystery and had played out his hand. His winning card had originally been Matthieu Marron, but now he had to settle for second best. Jack didn’t like being second, but the time for semantics was not now. “Why?” he urged. For now, the young man was being forthcoming. If he kept this ball rolling, then everything could be solved a lot sooner.

The scornful smile wavered, the edges of Will’s lips trembled violently. “If he waits too long, then the meat spoils.”

“He’s eating them?” Jack didn’t believe it. Cannibals weren’t exactly common; one was rare, and dealing with two in a year was almost unheard of. Unless, the cannibals were part of a cult, but Jack wasn’t counting them. Cults did a lot of weird things, such as orgies in ice caves, ritual sacrifice of children, drinking dragon’s blood, demon summoning, etc. They were always their own special brand of crazy. “So he’s like Hobbs then?”

“No. No. No.” Will lost any amusement he had been exuding and a little of his cool. He was frustrated. “He’s nothing like Garrett Hobbs. Hobbs ate his victims to honor them, but the

Highwayman… The Highwayman eats his victims because they're no better to him than pigs."

"You're claiming that Hannibal Lecter is the Highwayman." Will nodded. "With the exception of Beverly, there's no connection between Comte Lecter and any of the other victims of the Highwayman."

Will snorted now. "No immediate connection. We don't exactly have a way to document every interaction that a person has. It's likely that he plans everything years in advance before he thinks about making a move. He's an accomplished player of the Grand Game after all. It's known for the slow shifts of power and the skill that is required to maneuver your enemies into a corner."

This sort of delusion did not need to be entertained. Jack couldn't afford to go on a wild chase. Will had come to this conclusion while he was sick and desperate and now he was fixated on it. There would be nothing that Jack could say that would change his mind, but he thought the words needed to be said. "Hannibal Lecter is not the Highwayman."

Will sighed. "Who else do you know with unusual culinary tastes and a spark for presentation? If the Highwayman is killing, you can bet that Hannibal Lecter is planning a dinner party." The surety in his voice spoke volumes about Will's head-space and made Jack pause. He was so certain. Could Jack really afford to write this off? He came here, because he genuinely believed that Will must be onto something to be ready to kill a man. Just because he didn't like what Will said didn't mean that he was wrong. How many times had the young man been wrong? Not many. The elf took the opportunity to continue, probably aware that he had Jack's attention. "You and I probably sipped wine while swallowing the people we were trying to give justice." Such anger and conviction. "Who else does he have to kill before you'll open your eyes?"

Jack… Jack left Will to his own devices. He nodded to the guards as he left, considering the conversation. There was no way that Will could be right, but…

But that didn't mean that Jack didn't take notice.

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Hannibal finished taking care of his last addition to his newest piece. The felandaris was an inspired touch that he would have to thank the Seekers of Truth for later. This small little gift would be the first of many that would lead to Will's exoneration, much as the younger man probably wouldn't appreciate it. Will hadn't appreciated much of what Hannibal had done for him so far. Hannibal had worked so long to try and get him to a specific mindset and Will had resisted it for just as long. He almost had Hannibal convinced that the young man would never be a murderer, a killer maybe, but not in cold blood.

And then he had put a hit out on Hannibal.

Of course, it wasn't all bad. Will had let out a piece of himself, showed Hannibal just what kind of actions he would take if he felt pressed. It also showed how resourceful the young man could be. It was impressive, if inconvenient. Speaking of inconvenience, the Comte

flinched slightly as some of the stitches in his leg tore as he finished setting up. It was surprising how much strain simple actions caused his legs. He would likely need to see if Georgia Madchen could perform healing magic at a slow rate so that others wouldn't realize he had been active enough **to** cause the stitches to tear.

He sat for a moment and thought about Will. He would have to go back soon and all of his thoughts would be wrapped up elsewhere, but here he could think whatever he wanted without the imminent press of more important matters. Will had made himself dangerous, more so than Hannibal had expected. Keeping him locked up was now causing more problems than it was solving them. His friend was far away, and Hannibal couldn't just drop in and say hello whenever he wished. On top of that, his reason for keeping Will there was moot. THe young man could disrupt his plans just as much behind bars, considering the actions of both Beverly Katz and Matthieu Marron. If Hannibal wanted to accomplish his goals, he would have to gamble.

Will needed to be out. The noble's reach was longer that way and Will was not the type of person who could walk away from a challenge. He would march right into his grasp and then they could play their own game with everyone else as the pieces. There was always the chance that Will would do something drastic, he had a tendency to surprise Hannibal like that. Regardless of what he did, the stakes would be raised. Hannibal couldn't wait to see what the young man would do.

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Abigail sat quietly while Georgia concentrated on Hannibal. Both of the non-mages were watching as the ragged skin on his legs knitted back together from where they had torn open from his struggle last night. He wasn't otherwise injured, but admitted that the effort he went to for his piece had been more strenuous than anticipated and aggravated the cuts. It had taken some convincing to get him to let go of some propriety and just let them treat him as a patient, but he capitulated.

She had never seen Will do magic beyond small, paltry things. She knew that he had been practicing healing magic after he wasn't able to save her himself, but she had never known that it could look like this. It was strange, seeing the healing process sped up, watching as blood clotted and scabbed over then the scab becoming smaller and smaller. It was amazing and made her long for abilities that she was unlikely to attain. In her defense, Hannibal seemed just as fascinated.

Then, she stopped, the wound still open, but in much better condition. "Sorry," Georgia gasped. "I don't have the control over it that I should. It takes a lot of energy, concentration, and mana to do this properly and not utterly ruin your body. A lot of people forget that healing magic is some of the most difficult, mostly because you're trying to speed up bodily processes, not negate them entirely."

"What do you mean?" Abigail asked.

"Magic is weird. Mages impose the rules of dreams onto reality in order to change it. The problem is that it sometimes doesn't work super well on bodies. Sure, I can close up a wound, heal a broken bone, and cure some infections, but that doesn't help your body in any

way.” She shrugged. “One of the few things I remember from my lessons is that, unless the injury is serious, it’s better to allow it to heal naturally.” The blonde girl glanced over the nobleman that was redressing so that he was proper and put together once more. “If you try to speed up the process too much, the body won’t learn or do its job properly. You might heal the major damage, but leave artificial things that the body wouldn’t and that could cause problems later. We’re complex creatures, both inside and out.”

Abigail joined her in her gaze. His Lordship had finished right himself and looked to them. “My deepest appreciation, Messere Georgia. I’ll surely be calling upon you for your expertise in the future.”

Georgia nodded in return. “You are housing me. It’s the least I could do.” Once Hannibal’s back was to them and he was making his way up the ladder and through the hatch, Georgia’s face spasmed rapidly with emotion. Abigail wasn’t sure why she seemed so affected by their exchange, but pushed it aside for now. She had so many new questions to ask about magic and was sure that her friend had so much more to teach her.

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The four of them stood on the edge of the fortress, a jar of ashes in Alana’s hands. They had waited for the next morning after the funeral to do this, inspired by the prospect of a new dawn. The sunrise crept up over the horizon, bathing the world in gold. She looked down below and saw the battlements, each layer giving way to the next. Stones jutted out into the wide expanse of nothing until it was interrupted by rocks and earth. The only deterrent to seigers, besides reputation and affiliation, was the fact that the only public entrance was the drawbridge to the nearest patch of exposed land. Everything else was smooth and tall.

She held the jar out to Jimmy, the ash sifting around pieces of bones where the fire wasn’t hot enough to destroy everything. He took a handful and spoke a small prayer, barely heard past the wind that they were exposed to. “The Light shall lead her safely through the paths of this world and into the next.” Then, he tossed it over.

Brain came next, taking his own clump. It held a large finger bone, one of the metacarpals probably, and he brought it to his face and muttered, “For she who trusts in the Maker, fire is her water.” Then he tossed his.

Alana knew it was her turn, so she passed the jar to Jack and took her own handful. She brought it to oher face much like the others did, a little uncertain. This was the first funeral that she had done this for. The Sisters in the Chantry didn’t do this, they usually left the ashes with the rest of the faithful to keep them together or gave them to the family. Jack had told her that he sent a message to the Katz family, and they requested that this be done for their daughter, sister, niece, aunt. Alana whispered into the ashes, a secret between the two of them, “As the moth sees light and goes towards flame, she should see fire and go towards Light.” Then, she held her arm out over the battlements and let them sift through her fingers and join the others.

Jack held the jar out and spoke to the winds. “The Veil holds no uncertainty for her, and she will know no fear of death, for the Maker shall be her beacon and her shield, her foundation and her sword.”

The jar tipped and the rest of Beverly scattered. The group watched the ashes blow away until the cloud of grey had long since dissipated.

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Jack's team sent him 'home', which was slightly humiliating. Alana had glared at him and berated him for his lack of sleep and refusal to take care of himself, and because she started in on him, Jimmy and Brian took that as permission to do the same. It had been an entire week since he had actually slept through the night, but the word 'home' didn't have the same connotation that it used to. Home was empty. It was either his room in the Bastion or the small estate that had been set aside for him and his wife. Neither of those felt like a good place for him to try and get some rest.

So, he went to Comte Lecter's estate to be with his wife. It seemed like the only place he could tolerate being in, despite what Will would have him think. Of course, it was in the dead of night that his mind wandered without his permission. Bella had been happy to see him, but clearly resentful of being forced to stay with Lecter. She told him that the man was avoiding her, which wasn't exactly what Jack wanted when he requested that she stay with the man that saved her life. Being isolated was bound to drive anyone a little crazy. Luckily, she had the hounds that had faithfully stayed by her side and the servants were friendly enough.

He lay beside her, gently brushing her hair from her face. It ached to see her; overall, she was peaceful, but occasional twinges of pain would crop up and her entire being contracted. Jack sighed and rolled on his side. Wishing never helped anyone; he was better off closing his eyes.

Yet, no matter how hard Jack tried, he couldn't sleep. The comfort that laying beside his wife usually brought was gone. All he could think was that her skin was chilled. Her condition hadn't been improving like he'd hoped. He felt her shallow breaths with each quick rise and fall of her breast. The jolts when she coughed in her sleep had her spasming in his arms. Her nights had gotten better prior to them moving to Verchiel. He wondered if it started before or after she attempted suicide. He wasn't sure if he actually wanted an answer.

Wandering legs took him to the study, drawn by the noise of a crackling fire and the gentle clink of a glass. He entered the room and immediately felt claustrophobic. The room was designed to feel open, but the tall bookcases encroached on all sides, gold filigree suffocating him with wealth, the entire place was a stark reminder of whom he was living with at the moment. To top it off, seated in front of the fireplace was Comte Hannibal Lecter. Despite himself, Jack was pulled forward. The man had brandy, Antivan, in a snifter beside him. Jack's footsteps echoed across the smooth stone and the noble looked up.

"Jack!" Hannibal greeted. "You're up late."

Jack sat on a lounge nearby. "You are as well."

Hannibal swirled the glass and took a small sip. Then he poured another snifter of brandy and offered it to Jack, which he gladly accepted. "I've been dragged from sleep one too many times. My mind keeps lingering on death."

Jack thought to his wife and the perpetual smell of posies. “I’ll confess that I was too.” Hannibal nodded. “Bella’s alive. She seems to be accepting of that fact for now.”

Another sip of brandy and Hannibal inhaled deeply. “She’ll be alive for as long as she wants to be. Not a moment of that will be negotiable to you or to me.”

“I know. I worry so much about her.” He turned to Hannibal quietly. “I worry so much since I am so far away.”

“I promise I will look out for her.”

“You have too much on your plate. You already gave me my wife back.” Jack looked away, into the flames as the wood set inside crackled and popped sharply. “I feel like I exchanged her. Bella gets to live, but then the Highwayman takes Beverly. I paid one for the next.”

“Paid who?” Hannibal asked. “The Maker?”

“The piper.” The thought had lingered on far too long. The memory of the smell of flames, Beverly’s funeral pyre, had sunken into his parts of armor and he hadn’t brought himself to clean it yet. How long would it take for his wife to get her own pyre? “Beverly died only a short while before I got here. She knew I was coming because of Bella, but didn’t feel like she could wait. If only I had come sooner, damn the Lady Seeker and the Knight Vigilant, then I could have saved the both of them.”

“You can’t take that on, Jack,” Hannibal placed a hand on his shoulder. “You know what the consequences would have been and I doubt that Bella wouldn’t have gone ahead with her plan, regardless of your presence here.”

“I’m not taking it on. I’m making a note,” Jack protested, but it was weak.

“What you’re making are connections where there aren’t any.” Hannibal stared at him, observing his facial tics. Jack knew he was being rather free with them, which was abnormal. He didn’t have the energy to be more stringent.

He sighed. “There are connections, much as I wish there weren’t. There is a pattern taking shape and I just have to convince my eyes to see it.”

Hannibal gulped this time, and it surprised Jack to know that the man was being rather generous with his alcohol intake. “I’ve convinced myself of something I refused to see for a long time,” he said somberly. Ah. He was likely referring to the aftermath of Mathieu Marron’s attempt on his life. Will certainly didn’t seem regretful when Jack had spoken to him, and that was what stayed his hand most of all.

Jack watched for any signs of weakness as he remarked, “All it took was Will trying to kill you for you to see it?”

Hannibal must have better control than he gave the man credit for (and that was a large amount to begin with). His face didn’t twitch or slide in expression. He was stone. “I can’t

help Will. I can't trust him. He's in a dark place where the shadows move and it's no longer safe to stand with him anymore."

Jack did what came most naturally to him. If you want answers, you need to push. "He knows something's in there with him. The shadows move because he wasn't alone when he arrived. It's close to him, but he can't see it." No change. It really was too much to ask for, he knew it. "I feel the same way." He took a drink of his own, enjoying the slight burn and the bitter tang of the Plum Brandy. "We found another Highwayman victim. He was a noble, so I thought I'd ask-"

"No, Jack." The man in question was taken aback; Hannibal never interrupted anyone. The man held up politeness as if it was divine, so to see him break his decorum was something of a shock. "I'm sorry," Hannibal apologized. "That was aggressive, but I can't help you. If I want to come back to myself, I have to let all of this go, not just Will. I almost died. I would have died if your team hadn't arrived in time. I can't dwell on death anymore. I know this is something you understand."

Jack did understand. He recalled all of those conversations, back when Jack became comfortable with his initial instincts about Will. Those same ones were warring with him now, but he was so focused on the present moment that he pushed deciphering them aside for later. "I don't blame you."

"You shouldn't. You are going through your own troubles right now. Jack, we both have to transform our misfortunes into life-enhancing events, facilitating our growth. We have to strengthen our social ties and resist the temptation to brood."

Raising his glass, the Seeker replied, "When you figure out how to do that, let me know."

"Of course, I'm going to start by hosting a dinner party. I hope you'll attend."

Jack froze. Will had said something along the same lines. If the Highwayman was killing again… you can bet that Hannibal Lecter will be hosting a dinner party. And here, the Highwayman was killing again and Hannibal Lecter was planning a dinner party. Hannibal cocked an eyebrow and he gave a weak smile. "I wouldn't miss it."

Now he knew that he would have to speak with Will again, and also needed to prepare the team for the kind of work to come. If a noble was going to be involved, especially one with the influence of Hannibal Lecter, they needed to prepare their best back-stabbing clothes. His first stop was Frederick Chilton.

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Jack's news left Will angry and hollow at the same time, something he had never thought possible before. The rage was there, but distant; he could feel it bubbling under his skin and tried to grab onto it, but it slipped from his grasp. Since his conversation with Jack, Will's anger had lingered, an unwanted guest in his house. Up until that moment, Will had come to terms with the idea that his plan might not accomplish anything, but knowing that was actually the case was something else entirely. He had been trying to think of how best to approach the subject, but had just given up. So, glaring as Abel Gideon was brought back

into the room from his ‘bathtime’ (as the guards liked to call; Will did not get one), he decided to come right out with it and take no prisoners. “What did you talk about with Alana a couple of days ago?”

Abel actually seemed surprised. “You’ve been pacing for an entire day, maybe a little more, clearly something on your mind, and you start with that?”

“It’s been bothering me.” He fixed Gideon with a glare.

His companion sighed, “What do you think?”

“You should have let him die,” Will spat through gritted teeth.

A shrug. “Woulda. Shoulda. Coulda.”

The man’s apathy was his weakness. Gideon had signed his own death warrant and didn’t even seem to care. “You do know that he’s going to kill you.”

Apparently he didn’t, because Gideon’s response was to snort with amusement. He decided that staring at the wall was too banal and deigned to look at Will instead. “He can’t get me in here.”

“Can’t he?” Will asked and, for just a moment, his cell partner actually looked concerned. Whether that was for his own safety or Will’s sanity, it didn’t matter. “Here is exactly where he’ll get you. You’re next to me, which paints a giant target on your head. Have you noticed? For some reason, anyone that gets close gets got. I’m surprised I’m still here.” Gideon’s expression was unchanged. He remained slightly concerned, but it wasn’t with the right kind of urgency. His concern was a distant thing for something that was unlikely to happen. “You remember what you said to me? He’s smoke! A wolf in sheep’s clothing. I’d be nervous if I was the High Seeker, too. His proximity to me and the rest of the situation is bringing him close.”

“You’re telling me that Frederick’s in mortal danger, but you want an apology?”

Will clarified, “I don’t want an apology. I only want you to know that you made a mistake. The **only** way that you and Frederick are going to get out of this alive is if the Highwayman is stopped.”

Gideon’s jaw ticked sharply. Will braced himself for the next words out of the man’s mouth, because surely they would be designed to hurt. “Are you trying to find your taste for it?” he asked. It was a curious question to ask, if a bit on the nose.

“Taste for what?” Will replied. “Blood?”

A slow smirk spread on Gideon's face. He was trying to lead Will, either get him to admit something or to break down in front of him. The man had already seen too much of his vulnerability and had squandered his opportunity to save them both. “Doesn’t sit well on your palette, does it? The thick taste of copper on your tongue. Not your flavor.”

So, Abel Gideon thought that Will wasn't able to stomach death and being party to it. They both knew better. Will had been just as ready for Matthieu to kill as the Seeker himself was; Will just gave him the target. That was it. "Hannibal Lecter deserves to die," he assured and meant it, despite the small part that rebelled. The same part that led him to question the righteousness of his actions in the moment. It was easy to feel confident in your motivation for death with distance and failure.

Gideon turned away, which was more upsetting than it should have been. "That's how you feel right now. You know, that young woman everyone found, the one with the Blight, I've been thinking about her. She sewed others' skin on her so that no one could see the truth of the matter underneath. I bet no matter how hard she tried, it eventually withered and died after a few days and then she needed to adopt a new mask."

"It's just a phase?" Will honestly couldn't believe what he was hearing. The ex-Seeker was talking to him like he was a petty child, a teenager that needed to be scolded and reminded that the world was bigger than they were. "Wanting to kill a known murderer is a permanent solution to a temporary problem?"

"Wearing someone else's skin doesn't work; we can't do it. You're basically putting on clothing, adorning the leathered flesh of another. You can only cover so much before the world is obscured, and even then your bare skin peeks through the folds. I see you and recognize what is and is not you. No matter how much you think you want to, you didn't bring me here to kill Hannibal Lecter."

That much was true. Hannibal's death wasn't why Will had gone through all of this trouble to get Abel Gideon across from him. Until the man himself pointed out how desperate the situation actually was, it hadn't crossed his mind. "I brought you here to bear witness, and you couldn't even do that."

It was just a second, but Abel's eyes slid towards the door. Will hadn't been paying attention, but he got the impression that he'd heard something. Just as quickly, his eyes slid to Will's and the elf found himself caught in the human's stare. "To tell Jack Crawford that I sat in the main room of your poor little shack at the edges of the Alienage, seven Mabari hounds and all surrounding us and a box with ornate elven carvings at the foot of your bed. And then you. Having a fit in the corner. He had been waiting for us and that's where I asked him if he was the Highwayman. His response was to avoid the question entirely and then suggest I kill Alana Bloom."

He… he just said it. Everything. Was this an actual offer? "Yes. Tell Jack that."

"I'll tell Jack Crawford everything, if you tell me why he did it."

So, Will told him. He needed Jack to know, and apparently this was how he got it. "He wanted to see what would happen. If you did kill Alana, I killed you, if you went after Abigail or him, if nothing happened. It's all the same to him. He was just curious." Gideon seemed disgusted, which was exactly how Will felt about Hannibal's motives. Had and still. "And you saved his life," Will accused, and that seemed to take the human aback.

“I wasn’t trying to save his life,” Abel shot out, actually irritated. Will hadn’t been expecting this to be the thing that set the man off. “I was trying to save yours.”

He hadn’t been expecting that answer from him either.

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“To tell Jack Crawford that I sat in the main room of your poor little shack at the edges of the Alienage, seven Mabari hounds and all surrounding us and a box with ornate elven carvings at the foot of your bed. And then you. Having a fit in the corner. He had been waiting for us and that’s where I asked him if he was the Highwayman. His response was to avoid the question entirely and then suggest I kill Alana Bloom.”

“Yes. Tell Jack that.”

“I’ll tell Jack Crawford everything, if you tell me why he did it…”

The Seeker in question turned to look at Frederick Chilton with a dubious look, disbelieving the man being so forthcoming. The High Seeker simply grinned and shrugged. “They do get rather chatty, but this is the most I’ve heard from Gideon on the matter.”

Jack Crawford shook his head. “Abel Gideon is a lunatic, and we’ve already established that he’s been to Will’s shack before.”

“In the heat of battle,” Chilton argued, not to be dissuaded. He didn’t seem to realize that most everything Gideon just said did not prove that Hannibal Lecter was the Highwayman.

“We know he has a history of being susceptible to suggestion and we **don’t** know the exact circumstances of Will’s capture at the time.” There had been such a long period of time where the two men were unaccounted for, and the Seekers that had been guarding Will had all been killed. While Gideon had no way of knowing whether or not they were going to send more, that couldn’t mean that he noticed two of the most prominent features in Will’s little home. And… “If that isn’t the case, Will could have given him any details.”

Looking shame-faced, Chilton explained that he had been monitoring every prisoner he had ever had here through the guards. It was his private way of gathering information. Crude, but Jack thought it was awfully pragmatic. It would help give an edge to their organization more than anything else. Besides, Jack’s disagreement about the ethical nature aside, he was going to use the information. He needed to if he wanted answers. “There isn’t an exchange between those two men since they both arrived back that I haven’t heard.”

“Then,” Jack said slowly, “You are aware of what Will is accusing Hannibal Lecter of.”

“I am **very aware**,” Chilton replied. “The last time we ate together was a ‘modified’ pig blood sausage. I’m left wondering what the modification was exactly.”

“You believe it?” his tone of voice should have clearly stated that Jack didn’t. A partial affectation. This needed to be handled with care. Chilton was not a strong player of the Game

and tended to waffle between choices with regards to picking a side. For now, he would have to be kept in the dark about Jack's true feelings on the matter.

"He once served me tongue and then made a joke about eating mine." Jack hadn't known that. When did that occur? Also, it was hitting him how many jokes the man had made that could have been construed to be joking about cannibalism. 'Deliver your wife to my table.' The man did like to make those jokes a lot. 'I would love to have your wife for dinner.' It could also just be memory distorting to fit his current beliefs, however. He was going to remain skeptical.

"Will is… delusional. And he wants to reinforce his delusion. With you. With me. With Abel Gideon."

Frederick shook his head, his expression somewhere between sadness and triumph. It reminded Jack of pity, which did no favors for his current mood. "That doesn't mean he's not right," Chilton slowly said. An echo of Jack's precise thoughts earlier.

"No. It doesn't," he could hardly believe the words as they left his mouth, but they were true. People often called him paranoid, but he had been correct on more than one occasion. The old Lord Seeker Lambert had claimed, "It's not paranoia if they are actually out to get you." More than once, he had found that to be the case. The Highwayman is killing again, and Hannibal Lecter was throwing a dinner party. Just like Will said.

"Jack," Chilton interrupted his thoughts. "He fits the profile. We have been talking about what kind of man the Highwayman could be for years, and there's so much that fits him. He's curious, well-educated. While he is a noble, he has confessed an interest and some knowledge in medicine. He has experience with the Mortalitasi, which would serve him in preserving the bodies. He is a wonderful player of the Game, which affords him a lot of power over man. Cannibalism is an act of dominance."

It occurred to Jack. "You're afraid."

Looking uncomfortable with this truth, Chilton admitted, "How can I not be? He's a man with a lot of influence, Jack. Unless we come to the Empress herself with absolute proof, we'll be laughed out and he'll be ignored." He hesitated. "Have you seen Hannibal's drawings?"

Are these yours, your Lordship?

"I have."

A nod. "He's a remarkable artist. Just imagine what he creates when not restricted to a sketchbook."

Frederick seemed like he was ready to go and arrest the man now, but they really did have no evidence whatsoever, and Jack needed some time to think. If anything, the events of late proved to him that the best thing for him in an investigation was to exercise patience. It may have felt like they were going in circles, but that was because he was too used to relying on Will. The young man's abilities as a Somniari made it a lot easier to do his job. The dreams

granted by Fade spirits were never accurate representations, but the biases they were getting came from the killers which was almost even better. Their head-space was laid out in front of the dreamer, and once Will interpreted the heavily biased parts from the hard facts, they were good to go. They didn't have that now, and Jack couldn't get into Hannibal's mind and see the intricate ways that his thoughts and emotions work. Will couldn't even do that in actuality, it just felt like it sometimes.

A courier approached Jack with a missive, interrupting his thoughts. It seemed that another Highwayman body had been found, and a team of inexperienced Seekers had brought it back to the Bastion d'Argent so that someone on the team that specialized in the man could take a look at it. Jack was somewhat flattered that he and his team were considered **the** experts on this particular subject, even as it felt slightly bitter. If they were such experts, they probably would have found the man by now. Not for the first time, Jack wished that he could have gotten Will to dream near an actual Highwayman murder. He had asked Chilton what he would and wouldn't allow, but the man fastidiously refused any except for Beverly's.

The sight that greeted him in an area that had become reserved for them since their stay became a little more permanent and less temporary was that of a tree man. He had been carefully placed inside it and, not for the first time, Jack had to consider if the Highwayman was a mage. The way that the branches and roots intertwined with the victim's was fairly intricate. That was, until Jack saw the knot work and split skin that attached the two together. To keep the man where he was, long, twisted, thorny shoots without leaves and had been bent and stripped, making them flexible. They were stuck into the man's skin and made pliable enough to bind the man to the branches of the tree. He glanced around the room and saw that Brian was keeping clear from the body. Alana wasn't even there.

"Is something up?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Say hello to our newest victim of the Highwayman." Jack waved. "This is Marquis Ralés du Palier. He's not the Duke of anything, but he did care for Val Foret when the Duke was away on business. At least, he did until his disappearance one year ago. Honestly, most people had given up on ever finding him again. Apparently, the Highwayman must really care for nature."

One year ago. That meant that it was possible for Hannibal to have been the Highwayman, it didn't contradict the timeline of events. "What do you mean?"

Brian this time. "The Marquis du Palier was known for his hatred of the outdoors. Val Foret is about a week's ride from the Nahashin Marshes and the area you have to go through is covered with thick, dense forests. Du Palier was known for hiring mercenary bands to burn the forests around his estates. It should be noted that those forests often had sylvans."

"Sylvans?" Jack asked.

"Jimmy explained it to me."

They both turned to the former Templar in question. "Look, sylvans are this weird phenomenon. In places where the Veil is thin, spirits tend to come through on their own sometimes. They're pretty weak, but they just slip across. The powerful ones tend to stay in

their domains until they can possess someone. Sometimes the weak ones possess objects, others get corpses, but occasionally, a spirit ends up possessing a tree. Trees are kind of immutable. They do their own thing." Brian chuckled. "So it makes the spirit angry. They're trapped and they can't get free, so they become a demon of rage and start attacking people that come through their part of the forest. That's a sylvan."

Jack raised an eyebrow, "So you're telling me that a forest is filled with angry demon trees and someone's solution was to set them on fire?"

Jimmy shrugged, "Nobody ever said that the Marquis was an intelligent man."

"And this," Brain pointed out the twining thorny roots that held him around the tree, "is felandaris."

"Okay?"

"Will once told me that felandaris means 'demon weed' in Elvhen. It's named as such, because the plant only grows in the places where the Veil is thin. It's used a lot in tonics and grenades to make them more potent and have them spread out over a larger area. I asked some of the Seekers native to the area, and they do know of a couple of places within a few days to a week's journey."

Jack shook his head and voiced his thoughts aloud. "This feels like a trap."

"Can we afford not to spring it?" asked Jimmy, and Jack knew he was right. The last time that the Highwayman tried to contact them, he gave them Miriam's arm. Hopefully, he'd have something a little better this time. The really unfortunate aspect is that checking over that many areas was time consuming and they would need more information and permission for a search to boot.

Alana wasn't there. Jack had a feeling he knew why, but she deserved to know, to be ready. They were going to hunt down Beverly's killer, Miriam's killer, once and for all. The Highwayman was as good as theirs. With victory just around the corner, Jack was going to make sure that they all got their due. He could still remember the wild and angry look in Alana's eyes as she went after Matthieu Marron. She probably didn't even realize how much she needed closure.

Jack found Alana in the training yard, attacking a straw dummy with enough vicious precision that he pitied her next sparring partner. The last bits of summer were still clinging to the trees that had been allowed to grow in careful plots around the courtyard of the fortress, keeping their leaves a withered green slowly giving way to red, gold, and brown. When he had worked here, back when Miriam was alive, he would sometimes sit out here and watch the trees swaying in what little wind rustled over the walls of the keep.

"Alana!" he called to her and the sound of metal slashing against wood was punctuated by the cracking of the pole the dummy had been sitting on, her final words on the matter. She chugged her waterskin as she made her way in his direction. Knowing what she did, it was no surprise that she plopped heavily next to him and asked, "So, you spoke to Will?"

“I have.” No reason to hide the truth from her. She would just find out later. If she didn’t, he would probably be disappointed. “I recommend that you do the same at some point. I found the conversation fairly enlightening.”

Scoffing, she repeated, “Enlightening.” Pulling out a whetstone, she began to sharpen her blade. As she sharpened her weapon, Alana continued, “All of this is just so ridiculous. We’re getting so many answers and so many different opinions on the matter that it’s making my head spin. It’s maddening.”

“In my experience, that means that too many people are lying about a lot of different things.”

The young woman, another young woman that was his responsibility, steeled her resolve. “We are meant to find the truth, and the only one that I see is that Will tried to kill Hannibal.”

“The ‘why’ is just as important as the ‘what’ sometimes, Alana. He earnestly believes that the attempt was righteous. May be guilty, but he doesn’t feel guilty.”

He could tell that she was thinking about that moment in the spa. Alana had held the sword tip above Matthieu Marron’s heart for such a long time in Jack’s mind. For a moment, he was sure that she would finish the job, but something held her back. She muttered, “That says more about Will than it does Hannibal.”

A mabari bounded up to them, so Jack bent down to pet him. Will’s Mabaris were still at Hannibal’s estate, carefully holed up in a pen the man had built for the occasion after Bella… had to stay with him. As soon as the two of them moved into the Bastion (and it would be the Bastion at this point, Jack had already talked to the High Seeker), they would be coming with. “Where did this guy come from?”

“Girl and, uh, I found her. Yesterday. I needed a walk, so I went outside of the walls and she just ran up to me. I remembered that Will and Beverly both said that Mabari hounds bond for life, loyal until the day that they die.”

“Swapping one stray for another?”

“No,” she replied quickly, surprisingly vehement, then sighed. “Look, I haven’t given up on Will. I still think that the reason he was put behind those bars was something out of his control, but right now I need to reevaluate who I think he’s become. His situation has made him desperate, and I don’t like who he is now because of that.”

‘Will hasn’t changed,” Jack protested. He honestly believed it too. Yes, Will may be desperate, but there was still this sense of justice behind him. The young man knew and accepted what he was doing as an unfortunate aspect of life, something that seemed to be within them the moment that they met.

“He hasn’t?” Alana didn’t seem convinced of anything.

“He’s adapted.”

“And just what has he adapted to? Hannibal?”

Jack didn't know. There was so much going on that he needed to get his own thoughts in order first. So, that's what he told her. That didn't seem to make the brunette any better and she just scowled. "I've known Hannibal for so long. He was my mentor and friend, and he helped me realize that I wasn't happy. Hannibal has shown me nothing but support, no matter how silly the dream. He often showcased his more pragmatic side as well, keeping everything grounded. I knew him before any of this."

Too many things had happened in Jack's life to not expect betrayal to occur at some point. Trust wasn't a commodity. "I don't feel comfortable claiming to know anybody with any certainty."

"I thought I knew Will, too, but he is lying. Right now, he's manipulating and he's not scared. Not anymore. It's making him dangerous, to me and to you." She walked away and greeted Hannibal as he was escorted into the building. He was genuinely shocked that the man would try and confront Will, after all that had happened. Perhaps he shouldn't have been, he thought as he eyed the noble walking through their training yard and taking in every piece of greenery.

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The silence that followed in the wake of Will's conversation with Abel Gideon was decidedly strained. The pervasive sense of oddity lingered in the air, enough of it to make him uncomfortable. His nerves were wavering on a fine edge, anticipation building up. The elf couldn't see an endpoint, some sort of resolution that would justify it, so it transformed into restlessness. He stood up, and thought about walking around the room, but after three turns it provided him no satisfaction. The disturbance wasn't in his legs, but his hands. He clenched them around the iron bars, garnering a raised eyebrow from his cellmate. He pulled, anything just to the strain of activity. Pinpricks appeared under his skin, and WIll felt them travel their way up his arms like phantom insects. It was bracing, his senses so focused that he didn't even notice the door opening. It was only Gideon's movement in his periphery that drew his attention elsewhere, straight into the face of Hannibal Lecter.

"Hello," Will said simply. He honestly didn't feel like the man deserved much more than that. He realized now that the energy was in anticipation of this moment. This highly specific moment was daring him to engage. Will knew that he was just a mage and magic didn't automatically give anyone some preternatural foresight, but he did wonder if spirits had been involved somehow. He still heard their whispers when the nights were too cold and too hungry.

Comte Lecter's face betrayed little to nothing. Even his anger was dulled down into something soft; the thought that anything about a feared serial killer and dangerous Orlesian noble could be soft made Will instantly irritated. His scowl prompted his old-new conversation partner to speak. "It feels strange, seeing you hear after knowing what I know. I feel like I've been watching our friendship through several lenses, each showing the truth of the matter hidden behind what I perceived to be our friendship."

That would gather him no sympathy from Will. It had been exactly what Will had felt in those moments after he learned who and what Hannibal was. A betrayal after a betrayal. If

anything, he had a brief hope this was true; it would allow him to have some small personal vindication. He exhaled through his nose with a smirk, “Terrible feeling, isn’t it?”

Perhaps Hannibal glared.? The man’s eyes were so flinty, it was often difficult to decipher their subtle changes. People always had them, but the noble’s eyes were closed to him more often than not. “I am also aware that you lied to me. You’ve been lying to me.”

“Lying? Is that what it’s called?” Will asked, voice sing-songy and mocking. “I just wasn’t telling you everything. Hard enough to keep careful track of reality, it’s no surprise that I would deal with something similar in regards to remembering what I have and haven’t shared with others.” He smirked. “Can’t be helped.”

“You understood enough about Seeker Katz’s death. You knew her role and your role in that.”

A wave of anger brushed against his consciousness. Gideon was watching him closely, trying to see if Will would keep his emotions in check, and right now he didn’t want to. Rage and Wrath sprinkled their pleading voices in the back of his head, begging him to give in, to remind him of his powerlessness and how he could take it all back. “Oh?” he asked, bitterly. “And just what was my role?”

“Sentencer. Her executioner only killed at your behest. You’re just as angry with yourself as you are with whomever murdered her.”

Rage brimmed and banked itself. “Actually,” he replied, drawing out the word with his tensed jaw. “I am singularly angry and whomever murdered her.” Behind Hannibal, Gideon was trying to make himself smaller, not out of fear but out of curiosity. Will got the impression that he thought if the Comte became more aware of his presence, the conversation would change directions or stop entirely. An interesting thought and a tactic that might become useful to Will, should the verbal sparring irritate him enough.

Hannibal seemed uncowed, not that Will expected him to be. “You tried to kill me. It’s hard not to take that personally. However, if I were Beverly’s murderer, I’d applaud your effort.” It was a thinly veiled congratulations as well as a bitchy comment meant to get under Will’s skin. Well done.

It occurred to him that this was the first time he could be fully free with his emotions around the man. For so long, he had been trying to play the game and make the noble believe their relationship was something that it wasn’t. It was what kept him as himself, an individual. He hadn’t thought about it at the time, but the bold move made with Matthieu Marron put him on more even ground, even as it showed Hannibal his true face. He grinned. “Now I’m no more guilty of what you’ve accused me of than you are of what I’ve accused you of.”

“Seekers Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom believe you were responsible.”

Will knew. He was very aware of that. HIs conversation with Jack had gone better than expected, but Alana still hadn’t come to see him since the attempt. It hurt. Knowing that her opinion of him would never be repaired and that they probably would never be friends again left a sharp ache not unlike nausea, but that didn’t matter anymore. It was just the two of

them anymore. Anyone else were arrows in a quiver. “Where does responsibility begin and end?” Will asked. “With the final act or all the events that led to it?”

“I don’t expect you to feel self-loathing or regret or shame. You knew what you were doing, from start to finish, and made your own decisions… ones that were under your control.”

Will snarled. “You think I’m in control?”

Hannibal gave him, for once, what seemed like a genuine smile. Just the barest upturns of the lips, but it was there. “More than you’ve ever been. Be careful with that control. You never know how it might affect things outside of it.” He bowed his head. “Goodbye, Will.”

The Comte walked away and Gideon stared at him in shock. The conversation had started out with Will feeling triumphant, but now he just felt dread. Gideon shook his head, and both of them tried to ignore the veiled threat that loitered.

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Abel smiled when Frederick and Jack Crawford interrupted his and Will’s tense silence. After Hannibal had left, Will had been extremely agitated, prowling around his little cage like a big cat, observing the world with wary and hungry eyes. It was starting to make Abel dizzy. Luckily for him, the door opened and in walked two men, both with heads high and in their Seeker armor: Frederick Chilton and Jack Crawford. Will stopped at the noise and watched.

“What’s this about?” he asked, having a vague notion of why Frederick would have brought the famed Jack Crawford with him. Will was trying to catch the Seeker’s eye, but wasn’t succeeding.

“I’ve had a conversation with Jack, and thought you might need to have one with him as well,” Chilton said. He had told the other man about what Gideon had said then. Here was his ticket out of the hole.

Abel smiled serenely. “I’m sure you and Frederick have had many a conversation about my bad behavior. How does he describe me?”

“A madman. A monster,” Frederick replied and Abel did not let his expression falter.

“It’s so odd to me that you would say that, considering how your influence has affected me. One would think a Seeker of Truth would know better than to see the world in purely black and white.” He waggled a finger at Frederick, which only pissed the man off more. “Under what terms are you describing me as mad? Your own?”

“Yes.”

He hummed and turned to Jack. “I’ve always thought of life as too slippery for labels and definitions. Anger appears as lust, lust appears as fear, and so on. How does High Seeker Chilton present to Seeker Crawford?”

He may have pushed too hard, judging by the expression on the more respectable Seeker’s face, but the point was out there and would probably become more apparent later.

“I respect Seeker Chilton’s opinion.” A lie, Abel knew. No one could possibly respect that man’s opinion. It made no sense; half of his words were gibbering repetitions of those transcribed by others.

Abel shoved. “Would you say that he is beyond reproach?”

Jack’s entire posture grew larger and darkened the room. He could see that across from him, Will was paying rapt attention to Abel, trying to figure out his game. He thought it was very apparent, but perhaps if Will wasn’t so desperate, he would have seen it. “Do you have any information about the Highwayman?”

“Straight to the point,” he grinned as he spoke.

“You told Will that you had been in his home with Hannibal Lecter. Why were you there?”

He hummed, “I never set foot in Will’s home, and I only just met Hannibal Lecter last week. Seeker Chilton had gotten the layout of the inside of Will’s shack from the Seeker’s, having had the man under watch prior to Will being under any scrutiny, and was kind enough to share the details with me.”

Will’s icy glare bored into him, and he asked, “Why would he do that?” It was clearly an accusation.

Chilton hushed him, much to Will’s growing annoyance and repeated the question, “Why would I do that?”

He had an explanation ready. “Messere Will has been keen to believe that Hannibal Lecter is the Highwayman, and Frederick is doing little to disavow him of that notion. He has encouraged me to do the same.” Jack glanced at Will and the elf’s betrayed expression probably gave Jack the wrong idea. It was, however, the idea that Abel was trying to promote.

Frederick was seething now, and it amused Gideon enough that he thought about poking even further, digging his fingers into the cut he had made. The High Seeker spoke before he got a word in. “My apologies, Seeker Crawford, for wasting your time.”

“It’s not your actions or betrayal I resent, High Seeker. It’s the lies.”

Frederick grabbed Jack’s arm and moved to the cell door. “I’ll walk you out.”

He practically pushed Crawford out of the room, but didn’t quite manage to before Abel got in his last word. “High Seeker Chilton apparently had been watching Mathieu Marron’s career in the Seekers closely, even was the one to recruit the young man out of the Chantry. Marron attempts to murder Hannibal Lecter and you blame Will. You’ve got the right box, Jack, but the wrong corner.” Jack was pushed out of the room, but Chilton turned back.

Abel Gideon smiled at Frederick and the man glared. In a lilting voice, he commented, “Suppose you’ll have me beaten again for this, won’t you, Frederick?” The door slammed. Will, who had remained silent for the exchange, watched him warily from the bars across

from him. No words? Abel was sure that he would have something to stay, but a raised eyebrow only got a huff and nothing more. Will, who had now been granted books for his cooperation with Chilton, turned to them for engagement and otherwise ignored him.

That didn't last long. The cell door opened and several Seekers walked inside. He knew exactly what they were here for.

"All of that coiled resentment," Abel said as one opened up the cell door. "So bad for digestion." Will startled and moved closer to the bars as if that would do anything. One Seeker stood between him and unsheathed his sword.

Tight words came from under the helmet. "You yell and get the same treatment. You make a fuss, and we'll say that it was necessary to make you Tranquil, with or without the High Seeker's permission." Will's jaw locked and he looked at Abel with worried eyes. In a strange way, Abel felt like the two of them had bonded in this place, if only because there wasn't any other option. Despite their resentment of each other, if they hadn't been pushed together their days would have been more miserable than they already were. What Will didn't know was that he had a plan. Abel regretted that he would be leaving the elf to his own devices, but he had done all he could for him. It was time for him to think about self-preservation and getting away from the games and lies. The ex-Seeker winked at Will and continued to goad the guards.

"A woman Seeker. There are plenty of course, but she had risen up in the ranks rather quickly. Was she just that good or was she that good elsewhere? She had such a lovely smile, it was all in these eyes." They advanced on him. "Such beautiful eyes. It's why I had to take them."

"Shouldn't have struggled, Gideon," one announced loudly and held out a hand. Someone passed him a cudgel, the kind that recruits might use to train with instead of dangerous bludgeons or swords. Then he swung. The next few moments were a blur of pain and triumph. They couldn't kill him, much as they probably wanted to, because Frederick couldn't. It would reflect poorly on him and he would lose his precious Will if they thought prisoners were being mistreated. Sticks and fists cascaded on him to the point where the pain became normal and the momentary relief was a paradise of simple ache. This continued until he couldn't feel anything anymore and fell unconscious.

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Jack left the Bastion d'Argent feeling put out. The whole visit had been a massive waste of time, and had taken him away from his wife, who was still ailing. He had left quickly after and made his way back to Verchiel. His sedate pace and a night's rest allowed him to be there a little after morning began to wane. He spent the day with Bella, who had finally begun to speak in more than singular sentences, and informed her of Hannibal's plan to throw a dinner party that night and have them join the revelries as his esteemed guests. She was utterly disinterested in the affair, which relieved him immensely considering his own suspicions. The whole thing was just a theory, a hunch, too likely to ignore. Whatever he may feel about Hannibal, it was something vital for him to investigate.

Bella had politely declined Hannibal's invitation, and asked him again when they were moving back to their own lodgings. Jack told her that it would be soon. He had found comfort previously in leaving his wife in a place where she would have been safe and it would be difficult for her to attempt suicide again, but that comfort was gone. He knew that when he left this place, he would worry that he was leaving his wife in the hands of a serial murderer. While he was at the Bastion, he had already contacted the High Seeker about setting up a place in the fortress for her to stay. They were already setting up the accommodations.

Jack descended the stairs from the guest suite into the chamber. The estate was by no means a palace; it did support a modest ballroom, but the music was more atmospheric and no one was waltzing. The only dancers were the serving staff, moving smoothly through party-goers with food and wine. The Seeker actually recognized a few of the masks, including that of the de Chalons, the Valmonts, the du Launcets, the Montforts, and a few others. All of them were eating the food.

The food that was potentially made of people.

A server passed by with a tray and held it up for him, eyes cast downwards. "Would you like a tartlet, Messere?" she asked. Her curls fell out from under the hair wrapping, and Jack knew that he had seen her before, but not in Hannibal's house. It took a moment for him to recognize her. "No, thank you," he politely declined and moved away from one of Celene's handmaids. He thought her name was Briala? Regardless, it appeared that he wasn't the only one approaching tonight with a wary eye, but he didn't notice the Empress upon coming in. Perhaps she had only sent her servant as a show of good faith or a spy? It was something to be pondered later.

Someone stood next to him holding a small hors d'oeuvre, but not eating it. "Prosciutto roses. Heart tartare. Beef roulade," said High Seeker Frederick Chilton, eyes meandering about the room.
Needless to say, I won't be eating the food."

If it truly is needless to say, then he didn't have to say it. Jack rolled his eyes, but made sure that he was facing the other direction. The servant/spy, Briala, paused as she walked away and began hovering around them. She was careful not to alert them that she was eavesdropping, but he had already made her and was just as careful (if not moreso) to not let her know. It might scare her off.

"High Seeker," he greeted, allowing amusement to color his voice.

Chilton grunted and they both watched for a moment. "Hannibal the Cannibal. That's what they'll call him, you know." Briala stiffened.

"Not according to Abel Gideon," Jack replied, but he was splitting his attention between observing Briala and Hannibal, so it lacked forcefulness.

His conversation partner made a disgusted noise. "He's caused me enough trouble today. The fact that he lied to you makes me even more certain that he was telling Will the truth." He

watched as a roasted pig was carried by on the shoulders of several servants, balanced precariously on a short plate. After it moved, Briala had changed positions.

“If you are so convinced, why bother coming here tonight?”

“It’s the Game,” Frederick insisted, and Jack suppressed a snort. If ever there was a man so incompetent at the Grand Game, it was Frederick Chilton. Usually, he aggressively proclaimed that the Chantry should not have to play. “I do not want to appear as if I suspect anything. I’m keeping my mouth shut.”

“Biting your own tongue so Comte Lecter won’t be tempted to?”

“I do not want to be perceived as a threat,” Chilton declared. “That is why I shouldn’t be standing here, talking to you.” He limped off. Jack locked eyes with Briala and the young elven woman knew she was made. He blinked, and she was gone.

“Jack!” came another voice. Hannibal walked over to him. “I’m so happy you’re here. In many ways, you are the guest of honor.” He turned to the crowd. “This is the man that saved my life!” A gentle applause washed through the room before everyone returned to their own business.

He smiled, artificially gentle. “I’m afraid that I can’t stay, much as I’d like to. However, I would love to take some food to go, maybe even dine on it for a few days if I can get a preservation glyph.”

Hannibal nodded politely and waved to a servant. “I’ll have one of the staff bring you something from the kitchen.”

“No. No. No. This is good.” He located Briala in the room, still holding hors d'oeuvres, and waved her over. “If you could just bring me something, I can take something with me to go.” It wasn’t easy, but if they could get a mage to look through it, Jack could figure out if any human was in it. Jack didn’t know of any free in the Bastion, but there had to be one at the attempt at a University in Verchiel. He would just have to pull some favors. He glanced aside at Hannibal and saw a strange look on the man’s face. “Do I have your permission, Comte Lecter?”

Briala approached with a container, a preservation rune inscribed. This was an expensive gift, most material couldn’t hold that kind of thing and not for very long, so a mage must have cast a spell. Jack didn’t know of any friendly magicians in the area. The closest Circle was in Montsimmard and that was still two weeks away. This meant that there had to be at least one of moderate power in Verchiel, but if they were significantly powerful Verchiel would have more visitors. If he had to guess, the spell would probably only last a day, which was as long as Jack needed.

“Help yourself,” replied the Comte, eyeing him warily.

So Jack did. He made sure to get a couple of samples of each small delight before heading out. This would need to be done quickly before something went wrong. As he turned, Jack saw Alana staring at him from across the room, a curious expression on her face, one neither

of anger or contemplation, but both. This was far too important for him to ruminate on it further.

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Laughter and small talk reigned overhead with Abigail as their voyeur. Had Hannibal thrown a full-fledged dinner party recently? She wasn't sure, but didn't think so. It certainly didn't have this turn out at least; there had to be at least twenty people, possibly more. That meant that some of the meat had to be normal unless he wanted to draw attention to him. These were rich types. Someone would be bound to notice that the meat felt off. As it was, if the dinner parties of two made her feel alone, this was ten times worse.

At least she had Georgia with her this time. The difference that other people can make in a person's life was surprising. She had Alana for a short time, but even she had to venture out eventually. Speaking of Alana, that was when she heard the other woman's tinkling voice. She seemed to come way more often lately and it was starting to upset Abigail. She was a reminder of everything that stood to go in one single swoop. There had been a time where everything that people she knew did, especially with regards to Alana,, felt like a betrayal. How dare they live their lives without her.

"Are you okay?" Georgia asked and Abigail startled, then blushed. She had nearly forgotten that the other young woman was there.

"I'm fine," she tried to assure, but it sounded false, even to her. Georgia raised an eyebrow and her flushed cheeks only grew worse. "I'm sorry. I really am, all things concerned. The party upstairs has me thinking about the past and caused me to linger on painful thoughts."

The blonde woman seemed to look at the ceiling with changed eyes. Anger seemed to flash in the body language, and it quickly dissipated. Her friend walked away, leaving her with her boiling thoughts. Instead of leaving her to it, Abigail called for Georgia to come back. She wanted to share her memories with someone important to her, that way a piece of her went with her best friend.

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The party was starting to lull a decent time after midnight, which was predictable. This part of Orlais was inherently more orderly with the Grand Duke in charge and people wouldn't be as used to the lavish all-night parties that could happen in Val Royeaux or Halamshiral. They were simply too polite to say anything, which he appreciated. With that firmly in mind, Hannibal had begun subtly giving the more exhausted members permission to leave, aware that they were grateful for his acknowledgement of their problem and not forcing them to stay all the same. When it looked like he was temporarily in the clear as far as noble-to-noble verbal combat went, Nesiraya approached him.

"Your gift to Jack Crawford has been delivered," she said, holding up a tray of drinks and glancing across the crowd. No one ever thought servants were any real danger beyond information liability, so nobody gave him taking a flute of champagne from her a second glance.

“I appreciate your efficiency,” he dispensed his thanks and scanned the party for any conversation stragglers. They would be noted for the next time he was at court and he would wait a few more moments before he sent them on their way.

“You always do,” she replied and turned to him with a light bow.

Hannibal smiled, thrilled. “The game board is being rearranged. Soon I’ll be welcoming a new player.”

“Are they aware of the rules?”

He always did delight in how Nesiraya could read him. “Some. We’ll have to make a few more I expect.” He nodded to her, and she stood upright once more, tray still delicately balanced on one hand. “I’ll have to take the first step by dismissing a vital piece. Your task is almost complete Nesiraya.”

She froze. A passerby plucked another flute and walked off without a single glance in at her face or posture. “Complete, your Lordship?”

“You have been mentioning that you miss your family with increasing frequency. I expect that I will require a change in scenery before long and know that I cannot keep you for much longer. As promised, you will be allowed your reward.”

“Everything you promised?” Nesiraya asked quietly, almost as if she thought she would be punished for the doubt. If he had been another noble, perhaps he would have, but he never did appreciate those that mistreated their servants.

“Everything,’ Hannibal confirmed. “The money, the stipend, all of it. You have served me faithfully for many years, I would be a fool to not show my full appreciation.” He paused, just long enough for the sentence to actually see realistic. “Of course I may call upon you in the future, but only if there was an emergency.”

“Of course, your Lordship,” she spoke absently. Her thoughts were clearly elsewhere. It could be on the family or the fact that he was actually releasing her from her service. He saw no reason why not to, especially if everything went according to plan and he and Will had to travel a decent distance away to escape the horde of roaring children with a distinct lack of understanding.

“Our second guest will need to join the first as well, but she should be allowed to say her goodbyes. There’s a good chance that they will not see each other again.”

Nesiraya quickly replied, “And when should that be done?”

“As soon as possible. She should probably leave under the cover of the party. Everything else you will need to put it into place is at the agreed upon location.” She nodded.

“I’ll take care of it.”

He bowed slightly to her, carefully thanks to all of the potential witnesses. “It seems that much of the plan is coming to pass sooner than expected.”

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As Nesiraya moved away from Hannibal, Alana saw her opportunity. While she and the elven woman had never been extremely close, Nesiraya had helped her immensely with training and had been the one to initially inspire her to aspire for the Seekers. She felt like that deserved some acknowledgement at least, if not a show of gratitude. “Nesiraya!” she gently called out over the murmur of the party. The elf stopped, turned, and grinned at Alana.

“Lady Bloom! You are certainly living up to your name,” Nesiraya glanced at Seeker armor that Alana wore, even here. Jack had said something something, honor, something something, symbol, so Alana had taken that to mean that she was supposed to wear it at functions now that the Seekers were trying to be more open. Whatever that meant. “I see that you’ve managed to accomplish some of your goals.”

“Some,” Alana pleasantly agreed. “This is still just step one. I have you to thank for it, it was your training and encouragement that put me on this path and I feel like I’m actually doing something.”

“Changing the system from the inside?”

“In any way that I can.”

Nesiraya nodded. “Be sure that it doesn’t change you as well.”

Alana hesitated for a moment, then spoke again. “Much as I like to think otherwise, I think it already has. Or, at least, my worldview has changed since I’ve joined. Much of the things that I thought were simple have shown them to be complex and a person that I thought I could trust has done something unthinkable.”

“I did warn you that the world exists in shades of grey.”

“That you did.” The brunette sighed and slumped a little. Her whole hope for coming over was to show her gratitude, but now she realized that she needed to speak with someone. Well, someone impartial. Jack was far too close to the situation to really give her advice or listen without his own opinion. “I apologize, I didn’t mean to put this on you.”

The elven woman didn’t seem bothered. “It’s no trouble.” Nesiraya glanced to the side. “I will say that if you find yourself uncomfortable with your work and your part in the system, you probably need to examine why. I know I encouraged you to work at it, but also be aware that you shouldn’t force yourself to stay if the reason for your discomfort is too strong.” The other woman seemed extremely occupied and took a moment to shake herself out of her stupor before starting to move away again. “I apologize Lady Bloom, but I must be going. I have more errands to run for Comte Lecter.”

Alana blinked. “You’ve been gone a lot lately. Where have you been?”

Her words caused something in the other woman to put up strong walls. “A noble’s business is largely their own. I am simply trying to do what’s right by his Lordship before my service to him ends.”

“Ends?” Now, she was curious.

“Comte Lecter has allowed me a large sum of money for my years of devoted service to him, in addition to that which I’ve been saving from my salary. He may still call upon me in the future, but I have not seen my family in such a long time.” She bowed her head. “It’s time that I return to them.”

Alana was confused. Nesiraya had always seemed more like the type to push for the greater good that her service under Hannibal allowed her to do. Then again, she did say that it had been a long time since she had seen her family, even in previous conversations. Maybe the urge to be with them had grown too strong and she had re-evaluated her options? The woman had just said that sometimes your priorities change and that you needed to take stock of what you were doing and why. “I hope that you find what you need with them again,” she replied and let her be on her way.

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The party finally ended and it left Abigail feeling strangely drained. It wasn’t like she had been up there entertaining the guests with Hannibal, but the energy of the part had left her completely. Of course, that’s when she was given more bad news. Nesiraya walked down into their basement, and Abigail was thrilled at first. It had been so long since she had seen the elven servant/bard, and it was wonderful to see her teacher. However, the look on Nesiraya’s face made her stop in her tracks. It was serious and focused which usually meant that she had a job to do.

Following closely behind was Hannibal, looking solemn. “I’m sorry girls, but it appears that I will have to separate you. The time has come for Will to be set free, and unfortunately I will need Georgia’s help to do it.”

The blonde froze. “What?”

“Nesiraya will explain on the way, but in order to have Will freed, I need to let you back out in the world. She will give you clear instructions to follow to make sure Will is safe and exonerated, while also maintaining Abigail’s safety.” Hannibal was staring at Georgia, and it was disconcerting. What exactly did he mean by ‘maintaining Abigail’s safety’? “We don’t want to accidentally push them in her direction while they still think she’s a murderer.” Oh. That made more sense.

“Of course,” Georgia replied stiffly.

Hannibal nodded. “Say your goodbyes and then be off. I have all of the other servants busy cleaning up after the part, but they won’t stay occupied for long.” The Comte only moved about ten feet away, but it was enough room for her to speak with a semblance of privacy.

“You’re leaving?” Abigail asked and Georgia shrugged.

“So it would seem.”

“But they think you’re just as guilty as they think I am.”

Georgia gave a sad smile and gently hugged Abigail. Into her ear, she whispered, “I know, but Will saved me. The least I could do is save him.”

“I love you,” Abigail said, meaning it with all her heart. This girl meant so much to her and was the best friend that she had ever had, even more than Marissa. Georgia understood her and it would be difficult to watch her go. There was a good chance that they would never see each other again, but there would always be the hope.

She felt her friend, her best friend, smile when the muscles in her face moved. “I love you too.” They hugged as long as they were allowed, before a gentle hand drew their attention away. Nesiraya’s eyes burned with regret and some pity before she gestured for Georgia to follow her. She did.

Hannibal remained a steady presence nearby while she watched the two leave. Nesiraya turned to them, sharing something with Hannibal using only a simple look, before they were both gone completely. “Change is coming, dear one. Georgia is only part of it, and you shouldn’t have to worry too much. Hopefully, she will be able to rejoin society completely and be free of her curse. I’ve seen how you’ve brought her peace during your time together.”

That… helped. It was true that after they reunited that Georgia seemed to be doing a lot better than when they first met. Perhaps, when Abigail joined society again, the two of them could be friends once more. Maybe Hannibal could use his influence to pull her out of the Circle, and she could stay with them officially, in the light. They could spend time together at those silly cafes or go to balls. It would be great fun shocking the nobles of the court with a mage friend. It was a world she could imagine, and hoped that it would happen sooner rather than later.

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Abel fiddled with the manacle that kept him strapped to the cot. It had taken a while for him to return to consciousness, and the healers informed him (with as much bite as they could manage) that he would never walk again. By the time that he was cognizant enough to actually realize what they had said, it was in the dead of night. He overheard some debate in the hall about what they would do now and the ramifications of the incident, but that wasn’t truly on his mind. He was away from Will, and that was worth any beating and losing his legs. Not that he had anything against the poor young man, but Abel had a vested interest in his own survival.

For the moment, that was assured.

So, the Seekers left him to his own devices. There wasn’t much that he could do, chained and unable to walk. His early attempts at wriggling only left him disappointed. It was surprising what not being able to feel or use your legs did to the rest of your body. He was suddenly aware of how much he had relied on them during the day anytime he attempted to twist around and make himself more comfortable. The guard shuffled outside and walked away from the curtain. Healers always seemed to give their patients privacy curtains in places like this. Considering that usually a clinic had more than five patients at any given time, that made perfect sense, but it was just Abel at the moment. None of the recruits had gotten themselves injured and no one had been deployed nearby and gotten hurt. Thus, Gideon was

slightly confused about getting a privacy curtain for himself, but decided not to look the gift horse in the mouth.

He only started cursing it when the guard had stepped away for over fifteen minutes and no one came back to check on him. He hoped that it was just a matter of not hearing the Seeker's footsteps or maybe they got busy with some other recruit. He was in the Bastion d'Argent; Abel was sure that he was safest here. Of course, that's what he told Will, and the young man's response hadn't been encouraging in the least.

The privacy curtain rustled. It could have been a draft. It probably was a draft, but that didn't stop a cool pit of dread from spreading through his arms and shoulders. He flexed to ward off the nervous energy, but it shifted again, the movement causing him to go rigid (as much as he could in his position anyway). Then it parted.

Dressed in rudimentary Seeker armor and looking far too pleased with himself was Comte Hannibal Lecter, exactly the last person that Abel wanted to see. Even Frederick would have been better at this point. "Hello, Seeker Gideon," Hannibal greeted, and gave a warm smile. The pit grew into canals and he had to stop himself from feeling sick. The nobleman stepped fully behind the curtain and it fell behind him. Gideon got a glimpse of the other side and the eviscerated young man that had been guarding him, eyes lolling with fear in death.

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Jack had finally arrived at the Bastion, hoping to get some sleep. He passed the food off to Jimmy, who said he would check it and get a second opinion from Brian in the morning. His fantasies of a full night's rest were interrupted a couple of hours later as the grey of pre-dawn soaked through the window of his (and soon to be also Bella's room). Rapid knocking woke him up fuller and he croaked out, "One moment!" It didn't take him long to get dressed, although he was still not fully awake.

Opening the door revealed an anxious Brian. "Jack. We had another Highwayman victim in the night. Basically signed his work like a painter."

Jack yawned, which made Brian half-smile, "And it can't wait another hour. I'd like to be awake for the journey."

"Not really and you won't be going anywhere." Jack looked around his room, feigning shock at the lack of a dead body. "Not what I meant. The victim is here, in the Bastion."

The senior Seeker narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean here, in the Bastion?"

"I mean the Highwayman got in and killed someone within these walls." That woke him up and he immediately walked out of the room, Brian scurrying behind him.

Soon, he found himself in the healer's clinic, a distraught looking young man tearfully speaking with Chilton and staring over at the body that he was told had been hovering above the bed. Jack raised an eyebrow and Chiton just looked sourly back, surprisingly solemn. Brian nodded and spoke, "I'm going to return to Jimmy. We already took some samples and

are working on dismantling the body for evidence. Hopefully, it won't take long. Come find us when you're done here." He left, and Frederick Chilton took his place.

The body was currently laying on a cot, cleanly savaged. There were puncture holes going all the through key weight-bearing parts of him, ragged around the edges and sunken in with damage. If he had to guess, Jack would say that something had been pushed through the victim's body and was being used to hold him aloft. Jack could see that his belly was slit open and it seemed that a lot of the intestines had been removed post mortem (indicated by the color of the flesh and the distinctly smaller amount of blood).

"The Highwayman got into the Bastion and took Gideon," Frederick said simply. He seemed legitimately upset. "The healer was coming in for a pre-dawn check in on him to see how he was feeling, but found the body instead. It was held to the rafters by some thick vines that were supported by arrows which were pushed through his wrists, ankles, and sides."

"And Gideon didn't escape?"

"There's no way," Frederick assured, still staring at the corpse. "I checked in with the healer and she said he had pretty severe injuries and no longer had use of his legs."

Jack snorted, "Looks like Gideon found the Highwayman at last." He glanced towards the door and then back towards the High Seeker. The man looked perplexed and deeply concerned, eyes locked on the display. He sighed and said, "I'm going to go check on my team. They're looking into this and something else for me." Frederick Chilton was behaving so uncharacteristically that it was making him nervous, and Jack Crawford didn't do nervous.

"This is regular ass meat," Jimmy grumbled out between bites. "I mean, it's delicious, but it's certainly not human."

"And you can judge that?" Brian asked.

He shrugged. "My parents were merchants."

"They were not butchers."

"But we knew butchers."

Brian rolled his eyes and turned to the steadily growing impatient Jack. He had been listening to them argue about this for hours, and personally believed that it must be difficult to tell. Much as this assessment would have moved his mind in one direction or the other, you can't bring meat to the authorities and say, "This is human! My team said it didn't have the consistency or taste of normal meat." That kind of evidence could be faked and no one wanted to try potentially human flesh to verify.

Seeing Jack's change in mood as well, Jimmy leaped to move the conversation forward. "While this might not be people, the Highwayman has certainly given us a few." He turned

and the force of Jimmy's concentration pulled Jack to him. On a table, just waiting for Jack to see them, were the five arrows that Will had made of the remains of his victims.

"Why are you showing me this?"

Brian snorted, "You think they're Will's? I thought so, too. We double checked with the evidence archives, his are still in there. These are replicas, but they also contain human remains." He gestured to the teeth and the hair. "The remains themselves are remarkably similar to Will's victims. The only way we could tell if they were from the same person would involve blood magic, however cursory examination did establish some similarities."

"There were some differences, though," Jimmy added. He gingerly lifted an air and showed it to Jack to examine. "The style is subtly Orlesian. Will fletched his own arrows in a distinctly Dalish style, arrowheads and all, but the Highwayman worked his in a manner that seemed to be evoking the Dalish with some Orlesian sensibilities." Jack raised an eyebrow. "Even Will's ceremonial arrows are markedly more practical."

"So they're different people?" Jack asked.

Brian nodded. "They're different people, but this means that the Highwayman knows enough about Will's imprisonment to have intimate knowledge of information that wasn't released. He's close enough that he's had to have seen the arrows at some point. There's also something else." The alchemist pointed at the weed next to the arrows. It was the same one they found wrapped around du Palier.

"Felandaris?"

"So we definitely know that it was the Highwayman," Jimmy confirmed. "That's not all. This is dragonthorn." The plant he gestured to was a thick root that had medium-sized leaves extending from it. Attached to the leaf-stems were plump orange-red berries that screamed poison.

"I'm definitely keeping that," Brian remarked. "Gift from a murderer or no. That is a potent plant and super rare in this part of the world. It typically grows in the deserts to the west, but there are a few places in the drier part of the Exalted Plains that it takes. It is super powerful for its ability to stabilize wildly volatile components." He shrugged. "The root and stalk are also known for making great bows."

Jack froze. This was a message to them. Will's arrows that were just subtly not, a plant where the Veil is thin, and another that stabilized volatile components. Great bows. "The Highwayman knows Will."

Both of them stopped any idly chatter. Brian spoke first, "What?" It sounded wounded.

"The Highwayman knows Will. Maybe Will knows him back and maybe he doesn't, but this is the Highwayman claiming his crimes and saying that he knew Will well enough to place the blame."

Alana wasn't there. She had stayed, but perhaps it would have been better if she hadn't. It was Will's claim all over again, a hypothesis too wild to back, but too likely to ignore. He found himself asking the words before his mind caught up, "Where's the nearest place that both felandaris and dragonthorn grow?"

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Abel Gideon had been found by the Highwayman and was not having a good time. Hannibal Lecter certainly was, but the man that once claimed to be the Highwayman didn't particularly care about Lecter's pleasure. A large part of him was still smarting about how his grand plan to keep him away from Will and therefore of less interest to Hannibal Lecter backfired and only put him more snuggly in the murderer's reach. If there was some sort of afterlife, Abel hoped that humans and elves didn't share. He didn't think he would be able to stand Will telling him I told you so.

"Bitterness is not a good look on you and it certainly does nothing to improve your flavor," his 'host' informed him oh so helpfully from the other room. Abel wasn't looking forward to whatever the man had in store for him.

"I don't particularly care how I taste," he retorted.

"You should."

Wonderful. That's exactly what he wanted to hear. As if summoned, the man of the hour stepped into the room with a rolling tray. On it was a large hunk of clay on a platter. It was mostly plain, but there were a few decorative clay flowers molded into the shell. The familiar shape of it made him highly aware of his own missing legs which had been taken soon after he arrived. He had been drugged for the transportation to Hannibal Lecter's home, but found them gone once he had awoken, so perhaps he was over-exaggerating it, but he didn't think it was likely. Abel had been a Seeker, he had been trained to resist some drugs and poisons, and it was still night time. He was drugged currently. It was light, something only to make his body more relaxed. Much as he wished to scream or yell out of spite, Abel had seen a couple of servants walking in and out of halls on his way to the dining room. They were clearly his, bought and paid for. They weren't going to betray their Lord, probably because he treated them well. So, he had resigned himself to death.

His 'host' was disturbingly cheerful. Abel had admired the man for his utter inscrutability, but here the mask was off (literally and figuratively). Lecter was able to be **himself** . How… unnerving.

"Rôti de cuisse. Clay-roasted thigh and cut marrow bone." Lecter removed a small wooden mallet from the tray and tapped it mass just hard enough that the clay cracked, revealing the moist, pink meat beneath. "I love cooking with clay. The dish becomes much more succulent and adds a little theatricality to dinner." He carefully used implements to remove the pieces of clay away from the roast and lift it onto a separate platter.

Abel couldn't help but think of the comparison he had made to Alana Bloom. He had been trying to illustrate a point specifically in regards to Will, but it still felt appropriate now. Here he was, re-shaped by a new experience. A whole new perspective was being granted to him,

throwing all of his lost and fragmented self into the light. He was not now, nor ever was, this man. It was a sobering and relieving thought. He found himself repeating what came before, speaking to himself as much as to Hannibal, “People come into this world as clay and are shaped by the Maker’s hand.”

The noble looked absolutely delighted at having a sparring partner. “We come from clay, return to clay.”

“We return as ashes,” Gideon clarified.

“That may be the case for Andrastians, but I was offered a different path. Ashes are also usually scattered and return to the earth eventually.”

It was a fair point, now that he recalled that the man was Nevarran. They didn’t bury their dead in the traditional sense, but even preserved bodies decay enough that the remains return to the earth from their mausoleums. “I cede the point.”

Hannibal Lecter actually smiled before he pulled out a knife and elongated fork. “Shall I carve?”

Two stumps where legs no longer were twinged. “You already did.” Lecter proceeded.

As he cheerfully cut the meat, he continued speaking, “I can promise you that losing your legs is not the tragedy you think it is. Whatever incident that had led you to that ward lost you use of both legs. You would never have done anything with them again, so I found a more practical use for them.”

“Hard to have anything, isn’t it, Comte Lecter. Rare to get it. Hard to keep it. A damn slippery life.”

“We can only learn so much and live. Irony is, life is full of lessons.”

Watching Lecter cut up his legs into delicate slices of pink meat in morbid fascination, Abel retorted, “So is death, apparently.”

The other man pointed out, “You were determined to know the Highwayman. I saw you so desperately try and wear that skin, then try to understand it to understand yourself. Now is your opportunity.”

He laid the meat on a plate, beautifully arranged with a dark sauce, used sparingly so that nothing would disguise the flavor of the meat. “You intend me to be my own last supper?”

A blink. “Yes.” Then he placed several slices onto his own plate and sat down at the corner next to Gideon. For some reason, he was seated at the head of the table, which struck him as odd.

“I have been out of court for some time, so you’ll have to excuse me. I am curious, how does one politely refuse a dish in these circumstances?”

“One doesn’t.” It was a quick and painless kill of the words, unlike his own death which was to be drawn out. He sighed, and watched as Hannibal Lecter placed a sliver of meat, his meat, in his mouth and savored it. Abel looked down at his own plate in trepidation. Words floated over from his side. “The tragedy is not to die, but to be wasted.”

He didn’t have a knife in front of him, possibly because his captor didn’t want him to have a chance to shiv him. It was a wise choice, at the moment he was sorely tempted to try with the fork. For some reason, he didn’t feel like that would grant him the swift death he thought he was due. Instead, he used the side of the fork placed in front of him to cut the meat, which was so tender that it wasn’t a hardship. Lecter watching, so he placed the bite in his mouth and chewed on it. It was delicious, and that only made his awareness of the texture hypersensitive. He swallowed, and did the only thing that felt appropriate.

Abel said, “My compliments to the chef.”

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Abigail was alone once more, no longer able to spy on the servants or watch Hannibal go about his routine. Her coming to this estate had begun with her reuniting with an old friend, Georgia, and now her blonde companion was gone. The room had enough magical light and a small fire that kept it lit, but the corners were still filled with shadows and even a pleasant flame didn’t warm everything. It was a far cry from her days in the Winter Palace or being back in the Chantry of Red Crossing.

The young woman had thought for the last month or so that she would finally be happy. In the empty spaces of this basement, she and Georgia had dispensed with idle chatter and embraced the intense connection they had found in the healing halls once more.. Silence had been her only friend since she went into hiding, so it had been awkward at first. Their brief friendship quickly rekindled and bloomed. Of course, it had to end. Good things always did, Maker knows why.

Not having someone there almost made the loneliness worse. When she had first gone into isolation, Abigail hadn’t realized how great she had it. She was able to still be by Hannibal’s side throughout the ride to Val Royeaux and when they got there, she could still spy on the world outside. The basement meant that she couldn’t peer through walls and find Hannibal every time she needed reassurance. The world was filled with muffled footsteps and hope-hurt when someone walked too near the trap door. It could be Hannibal, it could be a stranger.

She was also aware that after Beverly’s intrusion, the door had been locked. If Hannibal was found out, she would be trapped down here, and no one would know.

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The place where both felandaris and dragonthorn were was remarkably close. Uncomfortably close. It was only an hour’s ride from the Bastion when they found it. It was late enough that the setting sun scorched the land in rays of red and orange, highlighting the berries. Poison. The air was hot and sweet, cloying Jack’s lungs. An alchemist more familiar with the area had loaned them a map which brought them to a waste. Jack remembered his conversation with Will, so long ago, about how the land had been hurt by the Exalted Marches against the

elves. The land certainly felt desolate. The trees had long since ceased and there were only the dead plains for miles. The heat bore down on them, hot in the beginning of autumn.

They circled the location where both plants were found, rabid for a hint of anything. There was a small cabin hide-away tucked between the hills, but still visible from a mile off. Jack insisted that his team wait as he approached, citing the fact that they weren't sure what kind of dangers they'd face in the otherwise unassuming cabin. If he was honest with himself, and he frequently was, he would know that wasn't quite true. Yes, there was a likely chance that the space would be filled with traps and they still weren't sure if the Highwayman was a mage, but the truth was that if the man was there, Jack wanted to be the one that dealt with him. He wanted to be the one that killed him. So, he left them behind.

Checking for traps as he entered, Jack was struck by the contents of the space. The room held designs for all of the Copy murders, detailed analyses of the original ones, as well as the means the Highwayman would have had to employ to do so. The Seeker didn't have to disarm anything, although an artifact in the corner made him nervous; he would have to have Jimmy look at it later. The cabin was one room and one level, filled with dust and cobwebs. Every step put strain on the old wood and caused the entire building to creak. Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw a rat skitter.

As he rounded a table, Jack noticed it. In the floor, off to the side, there was a hatch. It was small, barely enough for one person to fit through comfortably, but Jack found himself drawn to it anyway. There was a trap on the opening, so he quickly got rid of it, barely paying attention to what type it was. His mind was focused on one thing, the contents of this 'basement'. The trap disarmed and the lock disengaged, he pulled open the hatch, the hinge protesting. Voices could be heard, so Jack pulled out his magelight and stuck his head in.

Inside were two women, both blinking in the harsh blue light. One of them was better off, wearing dirty clothes and with greasy hair, but far more nourished. She hadn't been gone long enough for neglect to show itself seriously; he probably kept them both fed just enough. Jack recognized her immediately because of the stark Tranquility brand, the Chantry sunburst, emblazoned on her forehead. "Georgia Madchen?" he asked, and she startled.

The other woman pressed to her side and stared uncomprehendingly at him. The neglect had set in for far longer and what was probably a white dress now appeared to be nearly brown. Her hair was black with grease and dirt where Jack knew that she had blonde before. Through the creases of the dress, Jack could see her ribs and the jut of her elbow. The other one appeared to be completely gone, the left sleeve of the outfit deflated with nothing there. Immediately, he knew who she was and thought himself dreaming. There was no way that she was still alive and here.

"Miriam?" he dared to ask, a name whispered into the dark.

Ar lasa mala revas

Chapter Summary

> "Is there a catch? There's always a catch, life's a catch, I suggest you catch it while you can."- Flemeth, Dragon Age 2

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> Yes, this chapter was finished over a month ago, yes it took a long time to publish. Sorry that this is late. Depression is a bitch. Please see end notes for some discussion on Alana.
>
> Ar lasa mala revas: You are free (or) I gave you your freedom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack watched quietly while the two women they found clutched each other as they were led away from the crime scene. They were extremely quiet, neither even whispering to one another as a person helped them up into the cart to take them back to the Bastion d'Argent. Two women, both of whom Jack allowed himself to believe were dead, stared back at the house with confusion and sadness. He watched them as Georgia turned to stare into his eyes, hers pleading for something, but he couldn't guess what she would need from him. Then, the cart drove away.

The routine when they returned to the Bastion wasn't any less rigorous. The Seekers of Truth needed to find out what had happened to them, and they were concerned about how much damage the Highwayman had wrought on them.

"Did he touch you?"

"Did he speak to you?"

"What did he say to you during those times?"

"Did you see him?"

Over and over again, a flurry of questions were aimed at them. If Jack wasn't so worried about some of the answers himself, he might've asked them to speak softer or with less

fervor. However, the fact remained that he was, and he needed to know the answers to the questions. Besides, Alana was standing right next to both of them and insisting for him.

Miriam had refused to leave Georgia's side since they both arrived, but Georgia seemed to be not as anxious on the matter. It made Jack wonder how long they had been down there and what kind of treatment they had received. They had long since suspected that the Highwayman was a mage, considering the feats he could accomplish, so was that why Georgia might have been treated better than Miriam, a Seeker-in-training? Even with more confidence, Georgia shied away from everyone, the less the distance, the more nervous she got.

Once the questions were done, the medic that was attending to them asked if she could do an examination to see how they were doing. She asked, for they made sure the medic was a woman, if there was anything she needed to avoid or if they were okay with it. Georgia had said yes, but Miriam gave a resounding no which only confirmed more and more of Jack's theory. Once that exam had begun, he excused himself from the room. Both blonde women stared at him as the shutters went down, and he left.

Later, Jack sat in the candlelight of his office, turning over the parchment in his hands with what he thought were Miriam Lass's last words.

Jack, Please! He's giving me a moment with this, but I don't know what to do.

He had failed her. He hadn't looked for her. Who knows what kind of things that the Highwayman had done to her while she was in his tender care.

Every moment I've been down here was in the dark; I feel like I've been going blind.

Not to mention the fact that Georgia Madchen was alive. They were so sure that she had been killed, blown to chunks with a bit of runestone still visible. The consensus was that her magic was thought to be volatile and untrustable even by herself. A Walking Bomb.

The first few moments he allowed me with the candlelight hurt more than I feel comfortable saying.

They were found together, but Georgia wasn't the only one that the Highwayman had killed and blamed on Will. All of those corpses. The bodies. Cassandra Boyle. Marissa Schurr. Donald Sutcliffe. Abigail Hobbs. He failed them all so profoundly, even more so by not listening to Will at the end. The young man had clearly been onto something before the disease cracked him, but as much guilt as he felt, he wondered if he could afford to listen now.

I don't want to die like this.

So much still to do. If Will was right, he needed to show Hannibal to Miriam. His belief that the noble was the Highwayman wavered back and forth with each passing moment, some to the left and to the right. This might help him and help her to find some clarity. Clearly Will still felt strongly about this and Jack couldn't afford to not listen to him anymore. Footsteps

approached and, in his periphery, Jack could see the outline of a young woman with one arm come to see him.

I was so wrong. I was so wro and the splatter of blood.

Jack ushered in his once protege with a wave of his hand and encouraged her to take a seat in front of his desk. He had pulled out the chair some time ago in anticipation of this conversation, but wasn't sure how long it would take. A glance outside revealed that morning had come. Once again, he hadn't slept all night, and Jack felt the sudden exhaustion of that realization settle into his bones. It was a helpful reminder of how much he had been pushing himself lately. He would have to go on a bit longer. Maybe tonight he would get some sleep.

Miriam gazed into the corner of the room, small tear tracks running down pale and sunless cheeks. He could also see her eyes swimming around, desperate for shore. She scratched idly at the stump of her left arm, occupied with her own thoughts. He had once told Will that he could be his anchor, he could do it again now for Miriam. He left her alone to stoke the fire and brew some tea. All the while, they continued to sit in silence, dread hanging itself in Jack's heart. It almost felt like he was getting ready to leap. Finally, the tea was done and he handed over a cup, careful to place it where the right arm could reach and it would cause the least amount of trouble.

"Thank you," she murmured and took a sip.

"You looked like you could use it."

"No-not for the tea," she spoke up a bit louder. Miriam breathed for a moment and allowed the cup to warm her hand to nearly scalding before she placed it back on his desk. Her fingers still hovered around the rim. "Thank you for finding me. I knew you'd never stop looking." He had though. Jack had long since abandoned Miriam, sure that she was dead. The dread sank and muddled with the guilt. He couldn't tell her that; her worldview had already been so warped in the care of a monster that he couldn't afford to shatter it even a little more.

"Can I see him?" she asked, and he knew it was about to anyway.

"Who?" Jack asked in return, already knowing the answer and hoping against hope that he was wrong.

"The Highwayman."

He sighed. "We haven't caught him."

Miriam's eyes widened and her hand flexed in the air around the cup. "He's still-?"

Jack tried to calm her. "We have some suspects. We need your help, Miriam. You know who he is."

Her next words were surprisingly resolute. "I don't." He raised an eyebrow. "I don't know who he is."

"Clearly you must've at some point. You found him."

She shook her head just shy of violence. “I don’t remember finding him. He got inside my head and scratched the memories out.”

He didn’t want to pressure her anymore, but lives were at stake. A murderer needed to be caught. “Do you remember being taken?”

“I-” She stopped and then closed her eyes. “I remember a dream about drowning.” Miriam’s voice had taken on an airy quality, dream-like in its lack of substance. “Then being awake and not awake. Myself and not myself. I remember I could smell the air, saturated and damp. I think we were on the water or by a lake. It went on for weeks. Months. Longer and longer until the days and evenings blurred together. I’d wake up to the smell of fresh flowers and breakfast. Always, there was some sort of oil, herbs, or powder in my food. Then, I wasn’t afraid anymore.” She looked away from the spot on the wall, tears welling up in her eyes. “Fear and pain were so far away, on the horizon, but not close. It was never close.”

“I was reckless with your life,” Jack replied. It was the only thing that felt appropriate to say. All of the apologies and the regrets in the world meant nothing in the face of this young woman’s life that he had a hand in destroying.

“**I** was reckless with my life,” Miriam corrected him. He couldn’t allow her to blame herself for this.

“I saw what I needed in you and I used you. I let you break the rules on my behalf while I hid behind deniability.”

“Please,” she demanded. “Do not apologize for my mistakes.” She breathed and pulled her disparate pieces back together the best that she could. “He treated me very well until the end. Even when he took my arm, he told me everything that he was going to do. I went to sleep. I woke up. It was gone. He told me that he was giving it to you.”

He grasped at the first solid thing he had since this all began. “Did he say why?”

Her voice was thick. “He said he wanted to give you hope.”

“It can sometimes be brave to allow yourself to hope.”

“She’s lost hope. That means that you can’t.”

“Can you identify him?” The words held more promise in his heart than anything said before.

“I could only hear his voice, I couldn’t see his face. All I could see… was light.” She shook herself. “Georgia might’ve, but I wouldn’t know. We were kept together for a while, then separated, then returned together right before you found us.”

He would need to speak to Madchen then. “Why didn’t he kill you, Miriam? Why were you spared?”

She laughed, harsh and humorless. “I wasn’t spared. He was saving me for last.”

“Georgia Madchen,” Jack announced when he finally went to visit the young woman in question. He escorted Miriam back to the healer’s ward where someone would actually be watching out for her. They couldn’t regrow a limb, but some people were working on ways that people with only one arm could regain their strength and fight just as well without use of both. If Miriam wanted, she could be back into fighting shape in no time. If she didn’t, he was sure that they would help her out in any way that they could. It was her luck that she was right-handed and wouldn’t need to learn dominance in her left.

The two of them spent some time with small talk before Jack cut right into the meat of the matter. He asked her about her experiences under the Highwayman’s thumb and her limited interaction with Miriam.

“He grabbed me when I was asleep, so I don’t remember much about the encounter. I spent a lot of time in the dark, so much that I almost felt like I was becoming Tranquil again with how disconnected I was. Time blurred together, and I believe my food was drugged very often. Miriam told me that he talked to her, but he never said a word to me.” She hesitated before continuing. “I only know that he was male because of the way he sounded when I tried to get away, and even that is a bit of an assumption on my part. Grunts aren’t exactly easy to identify.”

It… sounded close enough to what Miriam said with just enough differences to say that she wasn’t copying the other woman, but something sounded wrong. Maybe it was her hesitance or maybe he was just being paranoid. Very few want to just talk about traumatic experiences with every person they meet especially one as overbearing and occasionally confrontational as himself. The few interactions that they had with each other were largely hostile or at least veering that way. “They’re going to transfer you. I need something to go on to give them a reason to keep you here, or they’ll do their own thing.”

Georgia smiled. “You mean make me Tranquil? I’m positive they’re going to do that regardless of what I say. I really don’t remember much, Seeker Crawford. Just my luck? I only remember how powerless I was and how much I don’t want to feel that way again. I-.” The words seemed to escape from her mouth before she could speak them. “How’s Abigail? Will?” she asked and Jack startled. He had almost forgotten that the two young women had struck up a friendship prior to her being taken by the Highwayman. If he didn’t speak to her, she would have no idea what happened to her or that Will had been framed for the Highwayman’s crimes. This had the potential to be a very long conversation, but someone is going to have to have it with her.

“You might want to pull up a chair.”

To her credit, she did it despite her confusion. The next fifteen minutes were filled with a lot of yelling and crying, not all of it from the distressed young woman whose world had already collapsed and was folding a little more.

They had the room specifically made for this with money given to them by the Divine herself. Interrogations rarely went well and Seekers of Truth had learned long ago that operating under a veil of secrecy was often the best way to get what they wanted. To that end, they had created a room largely made of stone and mortar with a pane of glass installed that operated like a mirror on one side and a window on the other. They rarely used it unless the situation called for it and the Bastion d'Argent was the only Seeker fortress with it. Honestly, they used it more when they were testing new recruits so that they didn't know who was on the other side. This seemed like an appropriate occasion for its usage, and Jack wondered if it would happen much more often now that he had an inkling of how this was going to work.

The moment after they had found Georgia Madchen and Miriam Lass, Jack had a message sent to Comte Hannibal Lecter for him to report immediately to the Bastion without specifying a reason. He was allowed to do that after all. The noble had done the smart thing and immediately left (if Jack's gauge of the length of time it would have taken for the message to reach him and for him to get to the Bastion was anything to go by). Jack made him wait of course, he needed to make sure that both of the young women were comfortable potentially facing their tormentor. He needed someone to interrogate the nobleman, and so he appointed Alana Bloom (much as he didn't really want to). Unfortunately, neither Jimmy nor Brian were very good at interviews and they were both busy processing the shack the young women were found in.

They sat facing one another, Alana seething visibly from behind the screen and Georgia and Miriam shifted where they stood. Miriam was staring at the pair unceasingly, but Georgia was observing the room as a whole. Jack kept his attention largely on the pair in the room with him. Alana wasn't going to ask any pointed questions and, should he be the Highwayman, Hannibal wasn't like to answer any.

The woman on the other side of the glass sighed. "They found witnesses. Survivors. The only victims of the Highwayman that lived to tell."

"Am I going to meet them?"

Jack saw Alana look over at the glass and Hannibal followed her gaze. "I've heard of those. So they are watching me right now?"

"They are."

"Once again, Jack Crawford finds reason to be suspicious of me."

Alana glared openly at the mirror in his vague direction before turning back to her conversation partner. "I wish I could tell you why this is happening."

Hannibal adjusted his seat slightly, but did nothing otherwise. There wasn't even a hair out of place. "I don't think even Jack can tell me why." He very well could, but barging in there would only cause more harm than good. "The fact that you're in here talking to me must mean that the witnesses can not identify the Highwayman by sight. He needs me to speak." A soft grin appeared on his face as Hannibal looked back towards the Seeker in the room with him. "Still, it's good to be in the company of a friend."

Alana adjusted some parchment that Jack had given her with talking points about the case. It was full of what she could and could not say, what was helpful and what wasn't. "We recently found evidence that Will didn't commit the crimes that he was accused of. He's innocent." The way that Alana said the words, the hope and hurt behind them, made Jack wonder what she must have been thinking at that moment.

"He is not innocent of trying to kill me and not of what is happening here," was the retort.

Alana appeared chagrined and looked at the parchment instead of the man across from her. Shame. She thought she should be ashamed of this or embarrassed. Seekers did what needed to be done, friendship and relationships be damned. Jack had, despite what he had personally thought about Will and now Hannibal. "He thinks that you are the Highwayman."

Hannibal looked to the glass with a calculating expression and stood, so rapidly and smoothly that it even threw Alana off. "He's no longer alone in that."

He walked over towards the glass and stood in front of them, positioned slightly between Georgia and Miriam. Georgia stared at him, distinctly uncomfortable with someone being so close and scrutinizing, glass or no. Miriam was staring as well, but with a surprising intensity. Something was building and Jack was almost sure that she was going to declare the man guilty.

His former apprentice dragged her eyes away and looked to Jack, shaking her head. "It's not him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He's not the Highwayman."

Jack looked to Georgia who was gazing anywhere else, deflated along with the tension in the room. "And you?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I told you I don't remember."

Jack's gaze wandered back over to the glass where Hannibal Lecter stared back. Surely, this wasn't over yet.

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Will had taken to staring at the empty space across from him for too long; it was a stark reminder that Abel Gideon had yet to come back after nearly a week. All that anyone told him (when he managed to bribe his Seeker guard) was that an incident had occurred and he had been taken to the healer's. If anything, Will was extremely aware that it was a stupid move on Gideon's part, and he had no doubt that his injuries are purposeful. While he had warned Abel that being near to him was dangerous, the cell was actually relatively safe. Hannibal wasn't going to try anything while they were staring at each other as it would incriminate him, and he would have to get past the guard, useless as they could be. Instead, he put a target on his back by going to a place far easier to infiltrate.

He was startled out of his musings by the cell door opening, and Frederick Chilton himself walking in. As far as Will was aware, the man only ever came when he had a visitor or a deal, so imagine his surprise when the man motioned to the barred portion of his individual cell, and the guard opened it without question. No one even bothered to handcuff him or otherwise prevent him from running off, but… he did have a lot of Seekers with him and his magic was still being actively suppressed. He asked the first question that came to mind: "Am I being executed?"

Chilton gave him a quizzical look before understanding dawned and he nodded to himself. "No, you are not." With a gesture, the Seekers in his entourage left the barred room and Frederick in his presence. The man still had a cane, although he was exaggerating his limp for Will's benefit.

Will raised an eyebrow. "Bold of you to have your entourage leave, especially with the chance that my magic could come back without them."

The High Seeker rolled his eyes. "I do not have the title of High Seeker for my health. I went through the training the same as everyone else. The moment I entered the room, I made sure **I** was the one supressing your magic." Will was slightly ashamed that he hadn't remembered that. As much as he liked to think of the man as incompetent, the truth was rather that he was **relatively** incompetent, which said more about the people he surrounded himself with than his actual intelligence.

"So what's this about?" Will asked, still a little wary now that the man reminded him that there was still a chance that Will was being taken care of. He probably could take Frederick with that limp, but a sword still very much hung from his side and Chilton was blocking the exit. Without his magic or any weapons, Will would have to get close to engage him.

"You're being set free," was the last thing he expected to hear.

"Excuse me?"

Chilton cleared his throat and said in a loud voice (probably to be heard outside of the cell to the guards waiting there), "The Lord Seeker sent a missive in light of new evidence found by an assortment of Seekers. It appears that the Highwayman is finally taking credit for his crimes." Frederick sighed. "On top of that, the Red Tattler delighted in sharing news of the Seekers of Truth holding a mage in the Bastion instead of a Circle with no evidence. While the larger public have no love for mages, they have even less for the Chantry. A few sympathetic or rebellious nobles and the Fraternities from the Circle itself have petitioned for your release."

"And this evidence came to light when?"

The other man coughed. "Over a week ago. Seeing as you were still in our care and we were unsure of where exactly the evidence led, no one thought to inform you."

"I see." They didn't want to let him go. How typical of the Chantry. Or maybe it was just Chilton.

“Part of the new evidence is that five days ago, two survivors of the Highwayman were found: Miriam Lass and Georgia Madchen.”

Will’s heart nearly stopped. Georgia was alive. So was Miriam. Then a brief burst of rage at the thought that they were spared and Abigail was not. Voices whispered that he could just as easily kill Hannibal and get rid of the problem, that they could help him. All he had to do was say yes. He ignored them instead. There was also something else. “They conveniently forgot about the near demonic possession.”

“I have not, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is that you temporarily have the support of a lot of people that could cause a lot of problems for the Chantry.” He chuckled. “Even the Empress has used the opportunity to take us down a peg, but I’m assuming that you don’t want to return to a Circle as has been proposed.”

“Not particularly.”

“So, let’s make a deal. You help the Seekers, you get a phylactery, you live at the Bastion for the time being, all of that, and you don’t have to go to the Circle.”

“So I stay here?” he asked Frederick, his opinion rather dubious.

“For the time being,” was Frederick’s reply and he smiled. “Perhaps one day we could simply lose track of you.”

Will highly doubted that it would fly with the Lord Seeker or that Frederick would actually allow him to leave, but it was a better situation than his current one or the one he would be facing if he was living in a Circle. Here, he could actually do something. Here, Will would have the freedom to be near Hannibal and potentially take care of the problem he would inevitably become.

“Think about it. Here, you would be able to stop Comte Lecter,” said Chilton, somehow becoming a mind reader.

“And he would go with you?”

“I’d love to have you trade places.”

Will smirked at the thought. “Certainly, he would be quite the prize.”

Frederick moved out of the way and allowed Will to finally exit the cell. They walked out of the door of his prison, a place he had been surviving in for far too long, and he was escorted by the High Seeker alone out of the dungeon and into the courtyard of the fortress. It was the first time that he had been outside while not drugged or asleep in nearly three months, and he allowed the moment to wash over him. His moment was swiftly interrupted by the High Seeker opening his mouth.

“You may be free for the moment, but so is Hannibal. We have a cannibal on the loose and I have no intention of ending up on his menu.”

“Then you should confess. Be honest about what you did to Abel Gideon, to more people than just me. Be open about it, and it might save your life.”

“The Lord Seeker would string me up.”

Will shrugged. “Better to gain the ire of the Lord Seeker than to end up as an hors d’oeuvre at one of Hannibal Lecter’s dinner parties. If you tell Jack what happened and about the bond you made with Comte Lecter without pretense, then you will deny Hannibal the shadows he requires to work. It may even help you with the situation with Abel in the end.”

The human scoffed, which confused Will until words came out of his mouth. “Former Seeker Abel Gideon has been playing his own game. He was freed from the ward by the Highwayman himself. I wonder what bargain they struck.”

Hannibal had already made his move. He was nothing if not efficient. “Gideon’s dead. With his previous claims of being the Highwayman himself, Comte Lecter wouldn’t bother entertaining a deal.” Will made sure to look Frederick in the eyes when he declared, “If he’s gone, you’re next.”

“Unless I unburden myself?” The question could have used less sarcasm, considering the serious consequences that would come from not doing as Will suggested.

“They say that confession is good for the soul. You’re affiliated with the Chantry, specifically an organization all about finding the truth of the matter. Shouldn’t you understand that?”

Frederick ignored the question. “You’re saying that if I confess, Hannibal killing me would look more suspicious? Or are you simply suggesting I kill what clout I have before Hannibal can kill me.”

“I’m **telling** you that you better start working on self-preservation methods. You need to convince everyone that Hannibal Lecter is the Highwayman in whatever way you can. Your life depends on it.”

He could feel the High Seeker’s eyes burning into his back through the prison rags. It was strange how some simply fresh air could make him feel so light and clean despite his sorry state. “Why didn’t he just kill you?” the man asked lowly. The other Seekers weren’t nearby, having sensed that the High Seeker’s conversation was meant to be private, but the volume of the inquiry was more about the intimacy the question implied.

Will smiled, sharply and with killing intent. “He wants to be my friend.”

That phrase seemed to only annoy Frederick rather than provide him the answers he so desperately wanted. It irritated him in only the way someone can feel jealous and then find discomfort in their jealousy can be. While Will himself didn’t have that particular response, he could empathize with it (beyond his normal capacity). When he had realized who Hannibal was, he was left bereft and betrayed, but not because the man violated his headspace and destroyed his life. He was hurt because Hannibal wasn’t the man he thought he was and that his newfound friend was a fraud. Now, he had enough righteous anger to

supplement his more personal betrayal and if his deception felt like he was repaying in kind, it was hardly something he was bothered by. It made the justice all the sweeter.

Chilton left, a relief to Will who just wanted to be alone. A simple minute to bask in the sun and the crisp autumn breeze was rejuvenating after so long in the muted blue light and oppressing darkness of the dungeons. It was a single, solitary moment of contentment. Naturally, that meant it didn't last long.

Even with his long, curly hair suitably ruffled by the wind and shoulders finally untensed, Will frowned when he heard the sound of footsteps moving from the stone alcoves along the courtyard to the grass. He opened his eyes and saw Jack Crawford staring at him, barely contained pity and guilt brimming inside. It spoke volumes through his eyes, posture, and tone when he eventually said, "Will."

It was just one word, but it held an apology.

"I heard about Miriam Lass and Georgia Madchen," Will said, and Jack stiffened. Then, he chuckled and his shoulders slumped.

"Chilton."

Will shrugged. "He's smarter than he looks. Did you catch him?" The elf already knew the answer, but he was curious as to what the official opinion was at this time. Jack shook his head. "How are they?" Will asked.

"Traumatized. Both of them."

It was to be expected, but that didn't make his soul pang any less. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like in Hannibal's care. His experience with the man had been so profoundly destructive to his life and sanity, and he had time away from the Comte. To be completely under his thumb every day for months (years in Miriam's case), was unimaginable. Jack's demeanor said that he was thinking along similar lines, but he was also heaping the guilt of their experience on his shoulders. "Don't beat yourself up too badly," Will tried to reassure.

Jack's eyes darted towards him and his mouth stiffened into a thin line. "You beat yourself up about Beverly?"

He hesitated. He shouldn't have, but he did, and it was all the answer that Jack needed. Will saw it. Instead of admitting it aloud and giving the older man fuel, he deflected, "Beverly's dead, but Miriam's still alive. The living can recover and heal, Jack. Trauma can put life in perspective."

Jack shook his head again and stared to the sky, keeping his gaze away from Will while he contemplated his words. It was a strange and even disconcerting role reversal. "She thanked me, you know? When we found the both of them, Miriam thanked me for not giving up on her, but I did. I gave up on her and I gave up on you, too." Will didn't say anything, but Jack waited for a response nonetheless. When it became apparent that the elf wasn't interested in

replying, he continued. “I thought she was dead, and I thought you were crazy. Neither was true, but I stopped trying to see it.”

“You seeing wasn’t the problem. What you weren’t doing was listening.”

Jack asserted, “I did. I put Miriam Lass and Georgia Madchen in a room with Hannibal Lecter, and they stated definitely that he was not the Highwayman.”

Will listened as well and heard the hidden statement behind his words. “Was it definitive enough for you?”

“No.” Jack turned to him and nodded with a small, but vicious, smile. “It wasn’t.”

Will considered that, and the ramifications that have occurred when he involved other people in the game. Then, he thought about how well trying to go it alone had gone. Jack Crawford was a Seeker of Truth and a very capable man; he could easily take care of himself.

“Where did you find them, Jack?”

Will was genuinely surprised to learn that the location both women had been found in was a mere hour away from the Bastion. It was daring and even arrogant of Hannibal to work so close to his enemies, but it was just the amount he should have expected from the man. After all, he had been working for years and no one had caught on. That kind of success rate had to make one confident. Hopefully, that also meant over-confident.

“We checked all records of it. This cabin had been abandoned for a long time,” Jack said upon arrival. Will thought that calling it a simple cabin was being fairly understated. While it was certainly no estate, it held enough space on its one floor to fit a home for roughly eight people, possibly more. Will hopped out of the cart with Jack; no one else had felt comfortable or had the time to join them.

Jack opened the door to it, holding it for Will. The cobwebs brushed against his curls and ears as he entered, Jack saying, “It appears as though the Highwayman has been using it for an extended period of time, probably for as long as it's been abandoned. Previous owners both died of disease and left no heirs.”

Inside, there rows of potted trees, all wrapped in drying cloths, with weeping dead branches that drooped to the floor. Cascading from the ceiling were the gauzy curtains that had been draped around Beverly when they had found her body. From the walls, there were butterflies pinned to boards, hanging over large plants fit to carry corpses. A quick glance to the glass in the nearby window revealed Beverly staring back at him from the reflection, sad eyes regarding his lost expression.

“Will,” Jack said, drawing his attention away. Will didn’t appreciate the look of pity he was receiving.

Dying flowers and vines littered the tables, all coiled in a withering mass. Will followed to where Jack was pointing. It was a hatch under a table, small and gaping, and Jack pulled out a magelight to shine down into the hole. Will took it gratefully and bent down on the floor

with it in one outstretched arm, peering down into the dark. It was dirty, and the space was barely able to fit two people, despite how empty the yawning maw seemed. The blood flowing to his head caused him to feel light-headed, so he came back up.

“That’s where we found MIriam,” Jack informed him. He had guessed as much. “She believes that the HIghwayman brought her and Georgia there to kill them. Apparently, he was going to kill Georgia in front of her; he was planning on her being his last victim.” Jack turned to him, pulling in his attention. The Seeker held out a bag of familiar herbs, the same kind that he used to chew to help himself dream. “He knows we’re close to catching him.”

Will took the pouch, and replied, “He’s been caught before. If you catch a fish once and it gets away, it’s a lot harder to catch a second time.” Abigail lingered in his thoughts. Do you fish or do you hunt?

Jack stepped away and Will’s eyes lingered on the bundle that had been placed in his possession. He opened it, smelling the contents. These were fresh, so Jack appeared to have been researching on his own. Pulling out his water skin, Will popped a few in his mouth and took a large gulp. They were tough, as he hadn’t had to chew uncooked plant matter in several months, and lingered between his teeth, but soon he had downed it. Then, his mind fogged away, taking his surroundings with it.

The dying flowers, vines, and branches on the table rejuvenated and bloomed anew, giving a new and fresh feeling of life. Small torches began to illuminate the space as the workspace bustled, a single man working one side of the room to the other with distinct grace. While at first they were separate and Will was simply watching, soon the figure turned and walked into him.

Then he was him.

He opened his eyes and found himself in his study in Halamshiral, dramatic curtains billowing in the space and obscuring it just enough that which study he was in was difficult to recognize. They flit past him and then there was a tree, rooted to the floor and stretching to the tops of the bookshelves on the upper floors. They were now in the one in Red Crossing, where he had Will had first begun to get to know one another. There was a man in the tree, flowers fully blooming. He had sown the seeds of this tree, just as he had planted them in this space when he first truly encountered Will, when they were first free to speak.

He had sown the seeds long beforehand too, back when Miriam Lass came across him and found herself not understanding just where she had walked into. Predators rarely enjoyed intruders in their dens. Even before, when he had ingratiated himself into the upper echelons of Orlesian society, he had been ensuring their lack of suspicion (beyond that which nobles usually courted). From his vantage point, he had been allowed to observe it all.

The floor yawned open to reveal Georgia Madchen and Miriam Lass staring up at him, before the flowing curtain obscured their faces and revealed a kitchen floor splattered with bright red blood.

Will opened his eyes, breaking free of the spell that he had held himself under with. “It’s theater,” he told Jack and the man looked at him dubiously.

“Every time that the Highwayman kills, it’s theater?”

The elf shrugged. That was certainly one way to put it, but it wasn’t quite what he had meant. “Sure, the killer is as dramatic as they come, and one could argue that every death is a set piece, but that wasn’t what I was referring to.” Gesturing around the room, at all of its ridiculous instruments of death and over-the-top morbidity (at the implements used to kill Beverly), Will continued, “The Highwayman didn’t bring Miriam Lass here to kill her. He brought you here for her to find.”

“We both know that the Highwayman isn’t self-destructive,” Jack replied, and he was right. “He’s not like Laurence. He doesn’t want to be caught.”

“He wants you to catch someone. Like he wanted you to catch me.” Will’s face twitched violently in indignation before he could stop himself. He’d have to get a better hold on his emotions if he wanted to go toe to toe with Hannibal Lecter. He efficiently put the mask back in place and noticed that Jack was studying every nuanced expression as if it would reveal every one of his secrets. “Jack. Be careful with Miriam Lass. Two years is a long time to have anyone in your head, let alone Hannibal Lecter.” He stepped towards the enthralled Seeker. “You can’t trust her. You can’t trust any of this to be what it seems.” Then he stepped away, leaving Jack to consider his warning.

Returning to the Bastion was an exercise in patience and willpower. Will wasn’t exactly enthused to have to be back there, but Jack patiently explained the terms of agreement with the Knight Vigilant, the Lord Seeker, the Divine (as little as she had to offer), and the Grand Enchanter. It was much as Chilton said; he could be free, but only under certain conditions and observation. As a mage, Will could guess which person lobbied the hardest for his lack of prison and required lax scrutiny. He would have to find a way to thank the Grand Enchanter later.

As such, Will had to also sleep in the Bastion d’Argent, but he got to pick his quarters and whom he would be staying with. The choice was simple. Jack’s squad had their own little bunks attached to the suite that Jack and Bella received (being a married couple), and his new supervisor (Jack) had informed him that the Mabari were staying there. The actual bunks were separated into two rooms, each with two beds. That would mean that someone would have to share with Alana, but she never liked anyone making exceptions for her. With her utter lack of communication with him following the attempt on Hannibal’s life, Will thought he might have to request either Brian or Jimmy share with her. If he had to, it promised to be an unpleasant experience for the both of them.

He asked, and both of them said no, much to his irritation. It was getting late, however, and Will knew that he was just going to have to deal with it. It had been a long day. Just before he was in bed, Jack motioned for him to follow the Seeker, so WIll complied. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do. The Seeker led him to the main room of the spartan suite that he and Bella shared, which reminded him of his cell only in the fact that it was clearly constructed from several rooms that had been walled off or had walls torn down recently. It was also very rushed. So, Jack may have pushed for the people accomplishing the project to hurry up, or Frederick might’ve. It was possible that it could have been both.

While the room itself kept Will occupied, he heard Jack say, “I’ll be back in just a minute. I have something for you.” Several minutes passed by before Jack came back and he held out a clay Mabari figurine for Will to take. His hands shook as he received it, enjoying the slight warmth and the reminder of Cole, the only person that had believed him **and** truly helped him. Baroness du Maurier had slightly, but gallivanted off at her first chance.

The elf was grinning widely and he looked to Jack to express his gratitude when he was nearly bowled over by eight Mabari hounds, all eager to see him. They were trying to jump on him and lick his face, so he tsked them sharply and they calmed, but didn’t stop roaming around him or apologizing to him. “This one’s new,” he commented, pointing to the eighth that hadn’t been his.

“Bella found her, named her ‘Acorn’. With Bella not here, Alana’s been caring for her. We didn’t want to leave her to the tender mercies of Orlais.”

Will nodded and said, “Thank you for taking care of them.”

Jack waved him off. “It was no trouble at all. They brought life to our little group and even helped Bella hold on for a little longer.”

“Well, I’m glad they helped,” Will replied and returned to absolutely focusing on the hounds. He heard Jack laughing as Will knelt down to pet them and was actually pushed to the ground by an overly enthusiastic Buster. They swarmed, eager to give him affection and receive it after so long without him. He threw himself into it, loving them as they have always loved him and basking in its unconditionality. Speaking of unconditional love, Will looked up through the throngs of hounds only to see Alana smiling sadly at the display. When she noticed his gaze, she scowled and stalked off to what was going to be their room.

Seeing this, Jack frowned and helped Will up. The mage refused to stop petting his Mabari throughout the process, taking comfort in them, but he knew it would have to stop soon, and he was going to have to confront Alana. “Has it been like this the whole time?”

“It has, and it’s not likely to get better any time soon.” Wonderful. Will grimaced. “I am glad you’re back Will, and not just because you are immensely helpful to our mission. I’m relieved to see you be declared innocent and granted the freedom you deserve. My only hope now is to help you get what little is still denied to you back.” Will glanced at Jack, momentarily trying to gauge what was meant by the comment and taking in the revelation about Jack’s intentions. They both knew that the only way he would be allowed out of this place and away from everything to do with the Chantry would be if the Highwayman was caught. Jack took a deep breath and looked to the door of Will and Alana’s room. “You probably need to go in there and confront this. I doubt it will be pleasant, but it’s going to have to happen eventually. Might as well get it over with.”

Will quietly agreed and walked over to the door, nearly tripping over his dogs. He carefully opened it and quickly closed it behind him, pushing out at least one snout as he needed to have this conversation with her without their distraction, much as he wanted it.

Alana was sitting on her bed, turning a locket over in her hands. “Welcome back.”

“Glad to be back.”

They sat in silence for a moment before she spoke again. “You challenged my whole framework of assumptions about the way you are. The way I think you are.” So she was just going to come right out and say it? Alana had gotten more from Beverly and Jack than he had thought.

“Just because you think I am one way, doesn’t make it true.”

“I was wrong.”

“About which thing? My innocence? My independence? You left me to question my own sanity and my sense of reality because those were things that you couldn’t see.”

“I am sorry about that, Will. In light of recent events, maybe my belief could have saved you from yourself.” Will flinched. “But that doesn’t mean as much in light of what you’ve done. The fact of the matter is that you tried to kill someone, Will. After all he’s done for you, Hannibal doesn’t deserve that.”

It was precisely all that Hannibal had done for him that was part of the problem, and it stung that Alana couldn’t see it. There was also no actual evidence that he had tried to kill Hannibal, so she was making a lot of presumptions based on words strung together by Abel Gideon, Matthieu Marron, and Hannibal Lecter. There was nothing connecting him to it. Not really. “You think I tried to kill Hannibal. Just like I think Hannibal killed Beverly Katz and so many others.”

“You’re wrong about him.”

“No, you’re wrong about him, Alana. You see the best in him, but I don’t. I’m not being pessimistic; I’m just a realist depressed by the truth.” He thought for a moment about what he could say to her, but there wasn’t much either could add to the conversation. So, he tried to advise Alana, much as she wasn’t listening to him at the moment. Better to warn her now for when the time came. “I’m going to stay as far away from Hannibal Lecter as I can. I suggest you do the same.” He punctuated the lie with dropping down on his own bed. Tomorrow he could get clothes and see if he could retrieve some of his personal belongings from evidence. Tomorrow, Will could figure out what he was going to do about his personal demon which was a lot more corporeal than the ones that lingered in his dreams. Dealing with him was going to be a lot of work, but the lives that he would save would be worth it.

Alana blew the candle out and the room was plunged into the dark.

It inevitably became a new day, and Chilton wasn’t the type of person that was interested in the well-being and well mind of others. The High Seeker had his own agenda, and currently that was toeing the line hoping that the Lord Seeker would forgive his potential problem making later. That was… if Frederick decided to tell Jack later. If he didn’t, then Will wasn’t sure what the brown-nosing was for. All it meant was that Frederick burst into the room he and Alana were sharing with a couple of other Seekers. He tried to give the room’s other occupant an apologetic look, but Alana just glared at him from out of the blanket.

Will really hoped that it was just because Alana wasn't a morning person, but a significant part of him doubted that was the case. Nevertheless, Will allowed himself to be escorted in hopes that his quick departure would alleviate some of her ill will. It probably wouldn't. There was some weird rule of thumb that said the universe could never let things work out in his favor.

The group eventually arrived at Chilton's office, a place he hadn't been since Abel Gideon was a significant problem. It was odd being there, seeing as most of the room hadn't changed from its gaudy decor and unintended mockery of Orlesian presentation. The last time and the first time Will was there, he had been an entirely different man. The guards left and Frederick pulled out a phial and a small knife, gesturing outwards towards Will with both of them.

Will raised an eyebrow, and Chilton rolled his eyes. "You know very well what a phylactery is. Part of the deal was that I had to make one. We're even having to borrow people from the Circles. He glared out at someone in the courtyard before turning back to Will. "They're going to have to add lyrium to it, the specially processed kind, and then you'll be able to **earn** the right to leave on occasion."

Will surrendered his hand and Frederick made a decent sized nick in his palm. Then, he carefully held the offered hand over the phial and blood dripped into it. If what Will knew about phylacteries was true, Templars were somehow able to find and track escaped mages with phylacteries, something about it glowing when going towards the target. The light would intensify the closer a person got. It was essentially an intense and magical game of hot and cold, not to mention that the whole process reeked of blood magic. "Of course, they're the ones that get to define that."

"Define what?" Frederick threw out and he barely managed not to flinch.

"Blood magic?" Will suggested. "I mean, the way phylacteries work sounds an awful lot like it. You activate very special blood with some magic sprinkled in and then things glow."

"It needs to be done," Chilton replied, allowing Will his arm back.

"Surprisingly, that doesn't reassure me," Will replied sarcastically and clutched his now injured hand. He pushed in some healing energy, enjoying the way his ability to use magic felt now that he had it back. It was safe the way people weren't. Sure, magic was unreliable at the best of times, but there was a normalcy to it and an independence that he couldn't get elsewhere. The power of it held him apart from others, but the capabilities made him useful. Power was the reason that Templars and Seekers could get away with phylacteries and not call them blood magic. There was something else that was bothering him, though, so Will decided to voice his thoughts, "What I'm curious about is why this didn't happen before? Isn't this supposed to happen to mages as soon as they arrive at a Circle?"

Frederick froze and then grimaced. "Honestly? No one thought you would still be alive at this point, so they didn't see it as a problem that needed to be dealt with. It wasn't like you could get out of the cell, so why waste a resource?"

Will flinched. As much as he knew that Chilton was speaking the truth, it wasn't a pleasant thought. Everyone in the Chantry hadn't expected him to make it this far, even expected his

death. A whisper of triumph did linger in his mind though. They had thought he would die, but he lived instead.

At least he could stay here instead of going to a Circle. Will knew that as soon as Georgia was cleared after questioning, that would be exactly where she was going, and, considering her history with them, it probably wasn't going to be a pleasant experience. There was also a good chance that he would never see her again. Georgia was a Tranquil, and she had asked to be made one. As a Somniari, she was already particularly vulnerable, and they would see that as an excuse (or permission) to have her go through the Rite of Tranquility again. He wanted, no, he needed to speak with her. Will owed her that much.

The young woman was resting on a cot in the healer's ward, looking miserable. At this point, Miriam had been allowed her own room, but the Seekers wanted to keep Georgia where they could find her. They exchanged gentle hellos for a moment before Will got into the meat of what he wanted to speak about. "So, don't remember anything at all? Are you okay?"

Georgia glanced at him, eyes slightly sorrowed. Even now, she wasn't particularly good at hiding her expressions, not from him at least, but Will could tell she was trying. Living for a decade or so without emotions would make an influx difficult to handle for years to come, so he wasn't surprised. The immense guilt that he could feel radiating off of her as he spoke threw him off. The former Tranquil bowed her head. "The healer said that people react to trauma in a variety of ways. I just happened to forget mine. It happens more often than you'd think." It did. Will knew it did, but Georgia was **lying**.

As much as his insides were screaming for some sort of answer, Will remained silent. It ultimately wasn't worth potentially ending their friendship in such a manner. "If you don't mind, I really don't want to talk about it," she commented, skirting around whatever Will might've said in another life at this very moment. "I'll only be able to see you for a little while longer, and by then it won't matter."

Will tilted his head, questioning what she meant, but realization dawned. "So they are taking you back to the Circle. I thought as much."

"And they're probably going to make me go through the Rite of Tranquility again. Honestly, I think it might be a relief."

"A relief?" He couldn't really comprehend why someone would want to spend the rest of their lives without emotions or dreams. Will hated his on the worst kind of days, but even then he didn't want them to be gone entirely. The Rite was destruction of the worst kind, it got rid of the person that was there before and left a husk afterwards.

Georgia nodded. "Honestly? Yes. All of this, the feeling and the trauma, is overwhelming. I just want to be free of it at this point. Once you are Tranquil, you never think about your life before. Everyone builds up this dread and screams that they wouldn't want it to happen to them, but once you're there, it doesn't matter. There's this all-encompassing sense of peace. A freedom without the messy and intense emotional connections that come with life. I will be able to look back on this moment and feel nothing but contentment."

Her unspoken words rang in his head. “And you’ll be able to look back at Beth and Abigail’s deaths with the same.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and the young and scarred woman scrubbed her arm against them to push them away. “It’s a wound. One that I’m not sure will heal properly.”

“Using magic to heal isn’t always the best solution. Our bodies need to do that kind of thing naturally.” He gave her a swift bit of eye contact to illustrate his seriousness. “Our minds need it to. If you keep using magic to heal, your body won’t learn properly. You’re inviting an infection.”

Georgia stared at him, seeming to be coming to some sort of resolution or personal understanding. Then, she shook her head and laughed. “That’s fair. I suppose if they give me the option, I’ll say no. If I want to get better, I’ll need to do it the hard way.”

Will laughed. “For years, those emotional handling muscles atrophied. Let’s build them back up.”

He was going to have to learn similar lessons, and he wasn’t alone in that either There were two women that Hannibal had kept locked in the dark, and Will still had yet to visit Miriam Lass. She was the one that had definitively stated that Comte Hannibal Lecter was not the Highwayman, but she had been in his tender care for over two and a half years. It was a long time to have someone poking and prodding at your brain. Hannibal had limited access to him for just about seven months, and he had done a number on Will. Unfettered access was a completely different story. Regardless of the danger, Will needed to see her, more than he had even needed to be free. It was part of his own closure, seeing the young woman whose life was destroyed by Hannibal Lecter and regaining the fortitude he needed to go through with his plan.

When he walked in to visit her, she was staring in the mirror and scratching the stump of her arm. Jack had mentioned that they were looking to get her some sort of prosthetic, though she still wouldn’t be able to use the arm. As far as Will knew, Miriam Lass was being resistant to their efforts, which he could only admire her for. It seemed that she was trying to learn to live with an unavoidable reminder of all that she had been through. It was an everyday confrontation of her past and future.

“Messere Lass?” he tentatively greeted. She startled, which wasn’t his intention, before settling down and looking over to him with slight suspicion.

“I could be wrong about how much progress has occurred in the Order during my absence, but I don’t recall any elves made into Seekers of Truth, and you don’t seem like a servant,” Miriam said, probably not really hearing the words. It wasn’t really insulting, only curious, but her detached air made it seem pointed. Luckily, Will knew well enough that her mind was probably still adjusting to the expected filter society put upon people after years alone in the dark. Will disliked that filter on the best of days, so he couldn’t blame her.

“You’re right,” Will replied. “I am not a Seeker of Truth nor a servant, but I am here to see you.” Her suspicion darkened, so he worked to correct whatever notion she may have been

building. “Until only a few days ago, I was a prisoner here in the Bastion, courtesy of the Highwayman himself.”

Realization, and then she nodded in acknowledgement. “You must be Will. The Augur told me that you’re the only person that demonstrated any practical understanding of the HIghwayman.” She hesitated, before continuing whatever thought she was reluctant to share. “He didn’t mention that you were a victim.”

“The Augur?” Will asked. It was slightly confusing, seeing as Will technically was trained as an Augur. Last time he checked, there weren’t any other mages in the Bastion, and Will didn’t have a double. Granted, the Augur thing wasn’t something he advertised. People didn’t like being reminded that he was an apostate, that mages outside of the Chantry could very well band together and train themselves, or that he came from multiple mage backgrounds. It was only among the Augurs of the Avvar that Will learned to truly harness and safely interact with spirits in the Fade, so they should be grateful.

Miriam appeared embarrassed. “The Augur… Sorry. Back in training, we called Jack Crawford ‘the Augur’. He has a peculiar cleverness and foresight, almost like he was consulting the spirits.”

Will supposed he technically was a few months ago. By proxy. For some reason, the notion amused him. Well, she did bring up Jack, so Will supposed his segue wouldn’t come out of nowhere. “Well, the **Augur**,”- the word was funny to say about someone that was not a mage- “tells me that you don’t remember much about what the Highwayman did to you.” She nodded. “I couldn’t remember either.”

“Couldn’t?” Miriam asked. She caught on fast.

“I remember now,” he clarified and motioned towards the chairs to get permission to sit, which she gladly granted. They sat across from each other, both victims of the same man who saw their lives as playthings. They were toys, easily broken for his amusement and then left as trash. “I don’t remember all of it, only bits and pieces. I was under his influence.” The elf laughed bitterly and glanced up to see a flash of pity on Miriam’s face. He couldn’t understand why she would pity him when she had been under his thumb for so much longer. “He used a combination of drugs and lights to create blackouts and lost time, both of which are terrifying for any mage.”

She smiled sadly and said, “I can imagine. I remember a light and drugs as well, although I wasn’t aware enough of the time passing to tell you if I lost any of it.” She paused, took a deep breath, and held it before releasing it along with whatever memories the words had forced her to endure. “He’d stand in front of it and draw my attention to him, like we were in an enclosed garden with a storm raging outside. He was my safety. I knew there were conversations. I would sometimes hear myself and wonder who was speaking with such intimate knowledge of my thoughts. He knows everything about me. I told him everything about me.” Will watched as she started scratching at her arm viciously now and moved to help her. His approach caused her to cease and then glance away, humiliated, when she realized why. Miriam hung her head and breathed out her next words. “It itches, like my arm is still there. I found myself scratching my stump ‘til it bled, trying to sort out which itch was

real and which wasn't. How do I scratch the itch in my head?" Will got the distinct feeling that she wasn't referring to the phantom pain of her amputated arm.

"If you want, we can see about finding ways to help you remember, but I don't know if it will console you. You and I are part of his design. The Highwayman wanted you free. He wanted me free, too."

She snorted. "Neither of us is really free. Can't you see that he's not done? He told me that he was going to kill me last, and that's exactly what he intends to do."

A raging flash of heat and anger burst forth at the audacity that Hannibal had making sure that this young woman wouldn't be able to rest for as long as he was free. If the Highwayman had wanted her dead, he would have killed her a long time ago, but the murderer had far more fun watching the lasting trauma of his actions unfold. "You're safe now," Will said with unexpected conviction.

Miriam only shook her head. "I won't be safe until he's dead."

It was surprisingly easy to sneak out of the Bastion d'Argent, considering that it was full of Seekers. He had snuck around the fortress before, but there was a marked difference between going stealthily around a fortress than out of one. Will also thought that, considering his previous status, the Seekers would have set up a guard around him, if only out of paranoia. Rather, the opposite happened. The Seekers that had been sent to watch him previously were outright avoiding him and the newer novices were skittish. It was… slightly amusing. Will had the courtesy to let Jack Crawford know that he was getting away beforehand so the man wouldn't send a search party after him, but was otherwise not interested in being polite. He only had to be fast in case his absence was noticed and they decided to use his phylactery. He took advantage of their avoidance and bribed one of the underfed stable boys with some healing magic, just a simple spell, to get ahold of a horse. Then, he set on his way.

The ride was nice. It had been far too long since he had just been allowed to go. His ride to the shed with Miriam had been limited by Jack Crawford as his riding partner, but this was where he could roam as freely as he pleased. Much as Will would love to cut loose and just go where the wind bade him, he had something to do. The conversation with Miriam was a reminder of his purpose and the stakes that came with it. Will had once considered himself solitary and insular. Fighting for a cause wasn't exactly in his repertoire, much as he felt good helping people. This wasn't a cause, this was justice, and Will would see it done.

One way or another.

The Lecter Estate in Verchiel was an interesting conundrum. It was grander than that of the Grand Duke Gaspard de Chalons, the noble that actually controlled the city, but the higher-ranked noble seemed to leave him well enough alone. Although, according to what Chilton had said (apparently once he believed Will, that meant Will needed to know some of Orlesian politics) the Grand Duke wasn't a man that particularly tolerated the game. There was a decent chance that he just didn't care. The house had plenty of servants, so it was a simple matter to become one face among the many. He thought that Hannibal would somehow have his servants be a little more wary, but they were not.

Hannibal was in his study, paying no mind to the world around him as he went through his finances. Will approached on silent feet, feeling the hum of energy twitching beneath his fingers tips. Calls to act in anger. Whispers. Movement came to his legs and soon, Will was right behind him, one hand pulsing.

“I was wondering when you’d come to see me,” Hannibal commented, the smile easily heard, even with Will unable to see his face. The noble turned his chair, no doubt scratching the floor beneath the legs. The behavior surprised Will, as it seemed decidedly less elegant than the man’s usual affectation.

Will fought the urge to smile manically, his outstretched hand flashing a subdued green and blue, before he tamed it, then snuffed it out. “Our last true conversation together was interrupted by Jack Crawford. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to pick up where we left off.” He paused, giving just enough time for the words to sink in. His next were spoken slowly, unintentionally emulating Abel Gideon. “If memory serves, you were asking me if it would feel good to kill you.”

Hannibal was unaffected. “You’ve given it some thought.”

It was frustrating. Infuriating. Voices egging him on like they hadn’t in years. Hannibal had been the one to reduce him to this. For so long, Will had gone without them, but his outburst had left him susceptible to demons and they were salivating at his desire and rage. “You wanted me to embrace my nature,” the mage spat through gritted teeth. “Just following the urges I kept down for so long, cultivating them as the inspirations they are.”

“And you never did answer my question. How would killing me make you feel?”

Will took one step forward. Hannibal didn’t move. He took another and another until he was right next to the man, and reached out the hand that had been surrounded with magic. The nobleman simply stared into his eyes and didn’t flinch when the mage put his hand to the noble’s face. He smiled and gripped the back of the head slightly. “Righteous.”

Comte Lecter’s face had yet to change, even with the other hand came up and they were both gripping him with such force that it might have pulled out his hair. He allowed his hand to heat with magic, and Hannibal flinched. The elf knew exactly what Hannibal would try to do: talk him down. Even now, he was asking, “Aren’t you curious, Will? Why you? Georgia? Miriam? What does the Highwayman want with you?”

Well, Will could poke and prod back. He was in power at the moment and was perfectly capable of asking his own questions. With a laugh, he said, “Why don’t you tell me? I wonder how Miriam Lass found you or what about Georgia Madchen was so important that you had to take her instead of kill her like you let everyone believe. You’ve destroyed any trace you may have left, but there will be more.” The calmer voices were slowing him down, and the more he thought the more he knew that he wouldn’t be able to kill Hannibal Lecter here, at this time, but there would always be later. Besides, seeing justice done sounded a lot more satisfying. The demons were held at bay by the new goal he had in mind. For what Miriam had reminded him of, Will would have killed Hannibal, but it wouldn’t give him the closure he needed.

“If I’m not the Highwayman, you murder an innocent man. You, better than anyone, know what it is to be wrongly accused. You were innocent, Will, and no one saw it.”

His newfound determination was almost derailed by his Lordship’s claim and reminder. “I’m not innocent,” Will said wetly, nearly choking on the words. “You saw to that.” He tried shoving those pesky emotions down, something he had always had trouble with. It wasn’t the time nor the place.

“If I am the Highwayman…” He absolutely was. “... and you kill me, who will answer your questions?” Hannibal brought a long-fingered hand to the one clutching his face. His hand felt like it was burning with magic, but the pain was soothed by the unnatural coolness that came from Hannibal; the comfort made him want to yank his hand away. A small, yet bitter smile graced Hannibal’s face, and he closed his eyes. “Don’t you want to know how it ends?”

Gently, Will slipped his left hand through the one also clutching it and down Hannibal’s chin. Hannibal’s words betrayed his desperation. He hadn’t seemed upset during their last free discussion, even with the prospect of Will killing him, but something irrevocably had changed. Will had told Frederick Chilton that the noble wanted to be his friend, but he hadn’t expected that the perceived chance of a relationship would give Hannibal fear of dying. It was a remarkable reminder that the man was human, and being human was a weakness.

It could be exploited.

Will smirked and removed his grip, soothed by the knowledge that he gained. He was curious, that Hannibal had gotten right, and Hannibal’s grand plan was still something he had yet to figure out. In the process of exacting just revenge, Will was sure that he would see the design clearer so… he decided to walk away. Leaving the noble behind, hand clutching thin air and eyes closed.

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Jack was exhausted. He had just spent the better part of the morning running interference for Will and helping him sneak back into the Bastion. The young man came back looking like the cat that caught the canary, but putting his feelers out revealed that Hannibal Lecter was still in good health. It must have been information gathering, and whatever Will found, it was big. His job was simply to figure out how he could help. Right now, that was making sure he got to sleep for as much as he wanted, citing that he had tired himself out with activity after being cooped up for so long. Alana had been avoiding the room like the plague since she found out Will was staying in it, even going so far as to stay with the regular initiates (whom, by the way, were teenagers), so there was no one to dispute it.

When he finally thought he could take a moment to rest, his exhaustion worsened with the arrival of High Seeker Frederick Chilton in his office. He was in charge and held more power than Jack did, so the man could come and go as he pleased. It didn’t make it any less frustrating, in fact it made it worse. Chilton strolled into the study like he owned the place, clearly needing to speak with him about something. Jack stood up from his desk and saluted with his arm braced over his chest and a slight bow. “What can I do for you, High Seeker?”

The man raised an eyebrow, but grinned nonetheless. Jack had never been one for rank, but he didn't feel like working with a report about his behavior later. "At ease, Seeker Crawford. This meeting is actually about what I can do for you. With the turn that the Highwayman case has taken, I've decided to involve myself in it. The man needs to be caught."

Jack heard the unspoken words. "You'd like to be helpful expediting Hannibal Lecter's arrest?" It wasn't surprising. After their last conversation at the Comte's dinner party and how many times Chilton had lamented the power the nobility had over the Chantry and its affiliated organizations, it would be more surprising if he was trying to help the man.

Still, he knew enough not to say it directly, even managing to look offended at the notion. "I want to solve the case and put this monster in the deepest dungeon we can find. I think everyone enjoys forgetting it, but I am a Seeker too, Jack. This is a part of my job, much as I am stuck dealing more with bureaucracy these days."

Jack retorted, "And you've been happy staying there as far as I know. Your potential involvement with this comes with your agenda, otherwise you'd be happy leaving well enough alone."

Chilton rolled his eyes and leaned closer. "My agenda is living. I thought that would be obvious. Every single other person than believed Will about Hannibal Lecter is dead."

"Except for you," Jack pointed out, and Chilton's face exploded into a cacophony of emotions.

"Yes, except for me. You know what that means? I'm next! I refuse to end up as an appetizer."

"And what do you have to contribute, exactly? All I'm hearing is an opinion."

Frederick said, "My expertise." It was a little too quick. "I also have intimate knowledge of one of the former suspects and now a witness. He-" (Here Chilton looked at him very pointedly) "is also in my primary care."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Will was somehow witness to his own manipulation?"

Chilton got closer, almost crossing the desk, and whispered, "I managed to bring out some of his memories. We were working and trying to understand what he was missing. Seeker Katz was even present for it. He remembers so much of what was done to him now."

The mention of Beverly got his blood pumping slightly in an agitated manner. He knew that Chilton probably wasn't intending to use her name to garner sympathy from Jack; he wasn't savvy enough for that. The chance that it was taking place still bungled Jack's bones. "Seeker Katz is dead and unable to verify your claim." Pausing, Chilton looked at him sheepishly, now realizing his misstep. "Besides, memories are well and good, but there's a very good chance that Will's were tampered with by the demon that was attached to him for a short while."

Chilton was immediately worked up into a fervor. “That’s what I’m saying! It wasn’t just the demon, if that was what happened at all. I found evidence that Will’s mind was influenced by someone, most likely Hannibal Lecter, and it likely happened to Miriam as well. You can watch me, but I’d like to see if the same techniques work for her and we can get some answers.”

While he understood Chilton’s desperation and confidence mixed together in equal measure, it was frustrating. How do you nicely tell your superior to go fuck themselves? So, instead, Jack said this, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. If that is the case, we don’t know what trying something like that may trigger. Besides, the Lord Seeker made her my responsibility. If you want to take custody of the operation, take it up with Prurnell.” Jack was bluffing (slightly), but he hoped that Chilton wouldn’t argue with him.

He didn’t. Instead, Frederick frowned and huffed before walking out. Finally, Jack would be allowed to take a fifteen minute nap at his desk and then go from there.

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Miriam stared at the wall, consumed in her own thoughts. It’s not as if she hadn’t been engaging with the rest of them, but, for the moment, she no longer had the energy to. It was safer and more comfortable for her to remain on the outside looking in. At least nobody tried to force her to talk. She felt like she had spoken enough for a lifetime every time the Highwayman tried to engage with her and refused to speak to her if she didn’t return the favor. Until Georgia, he was the only contact she had. After Georgia was taken, Miriam had no one and wondered if she had done something wrong to lose her new friend.

The rest of the group bantered back and forth about several new pieces of evidence they found and how they might help determine the identity of the Highwayman. Jack, who finally looked better rested (if not well-rested), kept glancing at her, but allowed the enforced space. Jack startled and looked back to the squad, attention focused elsewhere. Miriam couldn’t concentrate on their voices, too absorbed in the pounding of her heart. The tones started rising, nearing shouting but remaining just underneath. Forcing her eyes closed, Miriam tried to block them out, but, muffled though they were, they only got louder. Steady breaths, that’s what she needed. In. Out. In. Out.

Her heart rate decreased and the other people in the room became less muffled. She opened her eyes to notice that Alana was standing in front of her. It was a respectable distance away, but her intention to speak to Miriam was obvious, so the older initiate (if she could still be called that) cleared her throat and croaked out, “Yes?”

Alana tilted her head, entire posture screaming pity. Suddenly Miriam felt immensely tired, not just unenergized. Dealing with pity was irritating in and of itself, so she definitely didn’t want to have a conversation with a new Initiate where it would be coloring every word. Luckily, Alana managed to tamp down on the reaction before she spoke, which helped somewhat. “We just wanted to know if you could identify a few plants for us.”

“I believe that Brian is more of the plant person,” she said, pointing to the person Jack had told her was his alchemist. She had met him a few times during the initial Highwayman

investigation. Mostly, she just hoped that the other initiate would take the opportunity to consult the expert and leave her be.

Nodding, Alana said, “I’m aware, but I figured that asking you couldn’t hurt.” She shrugged. So that’s how it was. They were trying to include her. Miriam agreed as pleasantly as she could despite her reluctance and followed her over.

And recognize those drugs she did. Miriam swallowed, trying not to let her voice shake or pitch too high, and declared, “I know them, but not their names. He’d often show me them and then make tea with them. He said it would help me feel better. Any pain or distress I was feeling did go away after I drank the tea, but it also left me extremely foggy for hours or more afterward.” They all exchanged a glance. “What is it?”

“These plants are powerful. They are often used by the Qunari to make potions that help make a person’s mind more susceptible. Are you sure that he gave you tea?”

Her mind wasn’t clearing, but she knew this mention. “I never did see him make it, so I supposed I am not.” Miriam did know that the Highwayman wasn’t Qunari. Tall though he was, he didn’t have the musculature that defined them, nor the tapered (but not as much as the elves) ears. There also was a distinct lack of horns or horn stubs, although someone once told her that the Qunari could be born without them. “He wasn’t a Qunari, so why would that be?”

“High Seeker Chilton had those drugs, remember. He was experimenting on Abel Gideon to see if he could create an alternative for the Rite of Tranquility.”

Jack nodded, “He was, so we will have to question him.”

“So was Comte Lecter,” Brian pointed out. “We saw a lot of books on the premises that detailed something similar. Well, Jack did.” He respectfully bowed his head towards his senior. “He also expressed an interest in the techniques that the Ben-Hassrath use to change their people and a decent amount of knowledge of the practice.”

“He was trying to gain Chilton’s trust,” Alana retorted.

“But his knowledge and his experience with herbs makes him a likely candidate as well.”

Alana rolled her eyes. “I understand your reasoning, but I’m not happy about it. Hasn’t he gone through enough?”

Miriam was desperately trying to keep up with the conversation. Comte Lecter was the man she saw earlier wasn’t he? She told Jack that he was the Highwayman, but he still wanted to question him anyway. Still, Jack was the ‘Augur’ for a reason. It wasn’t worth arguing about.

“We’re bringing them both in for questioning. I plan to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.”

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Frederick Chilton had finally decided to investigate his expenditures, trying to look for anything that might give his activities regarding studying qamek away to the Seekers of Truth. He knew all of the tricks and turns that their minds took, being one himself, and one of the easiest ways to catch a person in Orlais was to follow the gold. Most people had to keep a ledger somewhere, not keeping one was seen as more suspicious than having one with a few ill charges. If Frederick wanted to convince Jack that it was just an idle pastime, it needed to look as such. That was when he found something… odd.

Apparently, around three years ago, there was a purchase under his name that he didn't recall making. It was with a large sum that he did not actually have (nor would he ever get) for a small estate in the Dales, relatively close to the Bastion. It was something that he had talked about with several nobles at parties, always trying to gain some sort of favor so he could have one financed. With everything else that was going on, it was just suspicious enough that he wanted to investigate it himself. Frederick let a couple of people know that he needed to leave on undisclosed business before he went to discover what this was for himself. Something possessed him to leave a note for Will as well, giving the location. For some awful reason, he found himself trusting the young elven man, and finding something so suspicious after everything that happened left him just paranoid enough to suspect it had to do with the Highwayman. There was a good chance that he was just impressing his fear of Hannibal Lecter onto it though. So, he didn't bother to wait for him.

When he got there, Frederick could only stand in awe. The estate was beautiful in a minimal fashion, managing to look just ornate enough to catch the viewer's eye, but not to be gaudy. It reeked of Comte Lecter, but of him as well. It was definitely the kind of home he would want (and had expressed wanting on multiple occasions), which left a pit in his stomach. Hannibal was one of the people he had vied for noble support from and had told of his plans. He had also told Jack on more than one occasion when flaunting his minimal wealth. Being a part of the Chantry did not actually pay well. Despite what his instincts were screaming at him, Frederick decided to explore. He pulled free his halberd, feeling a little uncomfortable with the heft and balance of it; he hadn't had to wield it in quite some time. Prodding the door open with the tip, he entered the small chateau.

The inside was just as well decorated as the outside, even in the open vestibule. The space was almost complete marble with silver accents (although gold was prominently in fashion), and it gleamed. The shine was just enough that he missed the wetness on the floor until his left foot slid in it, almost causing him to lose his grip on the halberd. Quickly, the High Seeker steadied himself and looked down at the floor. He had slipped in a puddle of blood and something else. It was hard to tell, but the liquid was just too dark, but still managed to shine on the beautiful floor, meaning it must be relatively fresh. He glanced around and found that the far side of the area had another small puddle, barely enough to really call it that.

Naturally, he followed it. And the next. And the next. He wasn't quite prepared for what he would find.

At the end of the trail was Abel Gideon perched on a meat hook in what appeared to be a meat cellar. The pools must have been blood that dripped from where the man was being carried throughout the marble halls until he was brought here. Abel was missing his limbs and clearly hadn't been breathing for a while. If the way the flesh was ripped and torn where

the book was pushed in his upper back was any indication, the former Seeker had been alive when hung, if only briefly.

“Maker… What an awful way to die,” Frederick gasped and took a couple of cautious steps back. An arm wrapped around him from behind and struck quickly at his throat. He wheezed and the shock of it caused him to drop his weapon. Voices came from the door, two of his novices.

“I saw him go this way in a hurry. I’ll admit that I’m curious what he was up to.”

“He left a note for that elf, and that’s how I ended up here. I snatched it up and followed the directions.”

“Huh.”

“That would be the welcome party,” hissed a familiar voice in his ear and Frederick just managed to turn his head and see the beady gleam of Hannibal Lecter’s dark eyes. Something about the lighting made them look the same deep red that the puddles of blood and the undefined something else were. He smiled down at Frederick and a chill shot through his spine. “I will admit that it is good to see you, Seeker Chilton. I was hoping you would show up.”

The noble, the serial murderer, brought up a cloth with some sort of fine, grey powder cupped in it, which Frederick instantly recognized. It was some sort of knockout or sleep powder. He struggled, trying to break his arms free of the hold to jab at the man’s eyes and then retrieve his weapon, but he wasn’t able to get enough leverage before it was slammed into his face.

Footsteps echoed through the halls as he felt all of his limbs relax. His brain slurred his own thoughts and he tried to remember why he should be fighting. “Is someone there?” a young initiate called out.

“One moment please,” Hannibal said far too politely for the situation and dread pooled in Frederick’s abdomen. Then, everything went grey at the edges…

Then black.

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Will had snuck out. After he saw a Seeker initiate searching his room, he decided to tail them when they left the Bastion (and met up with another one on the way). He had listened in just long enough to know that they saw High Seeker Frederick Chilton enter his bunk as well and then leave in a hurry, and he apparently left a note on one of the beds addressed to him. They had also said a couple of unsavory things about his potential ability to read, which he had just enough energy to be insulted by. Humans and their strange propensity to think that just because there were more of them, they must be smarter than everyone else.

The two he followed only managed to prove his point further. They must have been **very** new to the Seekers, because even Chilton was less obvious. Their traipsing in the more wooded areas was outright obnoxious, and they basically danced through the open fields that were

typical of the Dales. It was a very good thing that he was the only stalker they accrued during their journey. Eventually, his pain ended when they came upon the small but extravagant estate. Honestly, it was ridiculous how much the place screamed wealth so hard it was pouring from the seams of the walls. Orlesian. Painfully Orlesian. The two pitter-pattered their way inside, not bothering to hush their voices, and Will caught sight of their fate through the doorway. Two gleaming eyes shone in the interior as they stumbled their way in. The door slammed shut and shouting filled the air before it was abruptly cut off.

Will hid, watching and waiting for the entrance to open and the creature hiding inside the chateau to appear. If there was where Frederick had headed… there was a very good chance that he wouldn't be alive anymore. It kind of hurt his theory of what he had thought that Hannibal Lecter was trying to do, but it still wouldn't surprise him. The High Seeker had been a loathsome fly to the noble and it would hardly bother him to swat it, regardless of any plans he had. Hannibal always struck him as an opportunist and you know what they say about them and doors.

When one closes, another opens.

His whole endeavor with Chilton was trying to stick a bar in a closed one and pry it open for him. So far, he hadn't had the proper leverage, and Frederick was still resisting even to crack. If he was dead, it was time to move on to another one.

It took a while, but eventually Hannibal left. He was holding sullied clothes and putting them away to be burned. It was unsurprising that he'd one to get rid of anything linked to the scene that could be related back to him, even as simple as bloodstained breeches. Will was unsure why the man just didn't buy common clothes that could be used expressly for this purpose, but apparently the Highwayman ('robber' though he may be) liked to work in style. Will waited for a long time after the noble left, reluctant to walk in and find himself linked to another crime. Just as he was about to leave and find Jack Crawford, another figure stepped out. He was dazed and stumbling, half covered in viscera himself and looking like he was having the worst nightmare in his whole life. Frederick Chilton.

A large part of Will was thinking about just leaving the man to his own devices, but he pushed it down. This wasn't a door, but it was a window. Maybe letting some light in could show him one in the darker corners of the room. The elf cautiously moved out of his hiding place and approached the trembling Seeker, hands held out. "Frederick."

The man's eyes looked at him frantically, wide and panicked. "Will. I-I'm sorry. I didn't realize anyone would follow me, but he did. He did, and now they're…" Frederick glanced back to the manor. "Dead. Maker, I've seen plenty of death before, but not like this. Not without reason."

Will understood, in a sense. Frederick had been trained as a Seeker and had killed before, that much was true. It would have to be. When investigating deaths, he must have managed to keep away from the brutality or even seen the reason behind them. Blood rituals were never pretty, but there was always a clear and concise goal. Even Abel Gideon's murder of the initiate had something more behind it than thrill. Hannibal Lecter killed to make art, and, while it was beautiful in a grotesque way, it could be excessive. It also probably didn't help that Hannibal seemed to have purposefully rubbed the gore all over Chilton.

Will sighed, put upon by the whole situation. Another game he'd have to play carefully. "Come on, Frederick," he told the shivering Seeker. "Let's get you cleaned up."

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Several groups of young Seekers informed Jack Crawford of the intentions of the young initiates that had disappeared hours ago before their drills. Normally, they would have been found and reprimanded for their irresponsibility, but it appeared that they had the good sense to let their friends know where they were going. When more hours passed without any response, they told the highest authority they knew about the situation. Considering the fact that the High Seeker had been missing for just as long, having only told someone that he had business to take care of, naturally that left Jack. It didn't help that Chilton's disappearance left many people thinking him complicit or involved.

Of much greater concern to Jack was that Will was also missing, and he **hadn't** bothered to tell Jack. The elf had come and gone several times from the Bastion since his release, but always he had said something to Jack in order to assure his safety and ensure that there was someone covering him. This time, there was nothing. The Seeker spread a couple of rumors that he was sick and trying to recover while bribing the healer to keep it quiet for now. They enjoyed Will's presence at least and didn't mind helping cover him (but the cookies helped).

According to their friends, the initiates saw that Frederick Chilton had gone to the squad's quarters with a note and came out afterwards. They had been curious about the fact that the High Seeker had been steadily checking and re-checking all of his finances and legal documents, seemingly panicked by something he had found, and ran off. It was definitely suspicious, and Jack understood why a couple of young, barely trained Seekers would see this as an opportunity to prove their worth by finding someone corrupt within their ranks to expose. It was incredibly irresponsible and dangerous.

So, he and his squad headed out to find the missing novices. Without Beverly or Wull with them, Jimmy was left to track. The ex-Templar was not great at it, but his lack of skill didn't matter. They were clearly inexperienced initiates by the nice wide trail they left, and soon they didn't even bother having a specific person deigned to track their targets. They simply followed the footprints, broken branches, and indentions in the earth. If Jack saw them again, he would be sure to tell them to drag their feet less and learn how to move in armor without causing such a ruckus in the environment.

They were brought to an estate in the middle of nowhere that was far too extravagant. It appeared like the homes of most Orlesian nobles, designed to put up a front about how wealthy they were, even if it was a bit tacky. If Jack had to make a guess, it probably had something to do with the frenetic energy that Frederick Chilton had been observed exhibiting and the obsessive need to keep on top of personal records. It stood to reason that he might have purchased a small chateau, the man ranted about it often enough, but he would have to go back and check for its actual existence before and where the note had come from. He gestured for them to enter the estate, each person checking every corner.

Blood was seeping on the floor, still sticky but definitely cold. Not long enough to dry then. With how much was coating the room, it was hard to create a trail or sequence of events in his mind. Alana stepped slightly away from the group, her brow furrowed, which caused Jack

to notice what she was looking at. Peeking around the separating wall was a foot, arching like the person was laying down on a platform and their leg hung off. They spread out and went to examine it.

One of the initiates, speared through with a multitude of weapons much as the worker from the Lemaitres' vineyard or the novice killed by Abel Gideon. It only got worse when they found the body of Abel Gideon stretched out and mutilated. He looked like someone had been treating him like living meat. All of his limbs were missing, except for one arm, which had been placed inside the other missing initiate, whom had been gutted much as Chilton had experienced.Small bits of retribution exhibited on those that undermined him. And… Will was missing.

Alana looked up to him helplessly. "You don't really think?"

"He was a part of this before anyone else," Jack said, still trying to believe the dots that he was connecting. "Frederick Chilton could have talked with Miriam Lass. She could have made the connection, just like Beverly would have made the connection much later."

"Before Will?" Alana asked.

"Yes," Jack said, nodding gravely. "He had access to everything and would have known everything that the Highwayman would need to know." He took a deep breath and shook his head, despairing at the waste. "We need to return. Someone needs to report this."

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Will wasn't the kind of somniari that had access into others' dreams, so he didn't have a way to communicate with Jack Crawfrod (not that the man would be sleeping anyway). Instead, he had to sneak into Verchiel and acquire a bird to send a message to the Seeker. Several of the humans stared at him like he was insane, probably confused by the fact that an elf was literate, which irritated him just enough for him to snark at someone that gazed too long. This was the second time today, seriously. Hopefully, no one would recognize him from previous visits; the mage tried to leave any identifying objects behind in the Bastion, but hiding pointed ears, blue near-cat eyes, and unruly brown curls wasn't easy. He managed.

Just barely.

So, he and the High Seeker stayed at a quiet inn within the city; Will made sure that the man cleaned up in a river and changed into some of his own clothes so that Frederick didn't draw attention as well. Whatever exactly had happened in the estate had been enough to render his usually over-active tongue silent and compelled him to save the dramatics. Without his usual theatricality, Frederick appeared surprisingly small and unsurprisingly more tolerable. Now, the elf just had to wait out the man's presence until Jack Crawford could get there and they could manage the situation. Much as the other man probably wouldn't thank him for it, contacting the Seeker was their only chance of him not being killed on sight. That is, if Jack wasn't angry enough to kill Frederick Chilton on principle. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. That's why he chose to move them to an inn, to deter any instincts that would arise if they were somewhere isolated.

Right now, he was seated and watching the man pace back and forth in their room, feet unable to stop for even a single moment. Frederick was muttering, “Of course, of course.”

“Yes?” Will asked, hoping engagement would get him to calm down a little.

“I finally understand what’s going on here. He wanted a patsy, and he knew that my profile was close enough to his for me to seem like the reasonable culprit!”

Will thought that he really didn’t. If they looked in the records long enough, there was a good chance that they could find alibis. Part of the Highwayman’s psychology was that he had also had access to Will, or at least knew about him during the Hobbs investigation. As far as Will knew, Chiton had neither. Well, maybe someone could try and connect them together, but that was Will’s thought process. The entire way that Frederick was going about it in response screamed guilt. “And just what are you planning to do now? If you run, you’ll look guilty.”

“And?” Frederick yelled, and Will winced. There were a lot of people downstairs. “You didn’t run, and you looked plenty guilty. In fact, you waited for everyone to come find you like a patient little puppy.” The elf resented that statement, but understood that the High Seeker (well, former High Seeker now) was extremely stressed. “There is an estate that I never bought in my name, in my records! Somehow it was planted deep enough and far back enough that no one will suspect a thing. Inside of it are corpses, Abel Gideon was half-eaten. You…” He grimaced and resumed pacing. “You just threw up an ear.”

An ear of someone he cherished. The elf tried to control himself, even as he was rapidly losing patience. Where the fuck was Jack? “They are going to find you. You aren’t exactly good at hiding.”

Frederick stopped and glanced at him sideways. “I’ve hidden before.” Of course. “The Seekers think that I’ve killed several of our kind and murdered plenty more. Forget what happened to Abel Gideon, I’ll be cast out into the Sea of Ashes as soon as I’m seen, if not cut down outright!”

“I am going to prove that Hannibal Lecter is the Highwayman,” Will asserted, trying to convince the man not to do anything drastic.

“Of course. Once you do, I will know and I will return to society. Until then-”

A crash was heard downstairs as the door to the inn slammed open. Jack Crawford’s booming voice could be heard even several floors up. Will tilted his head towards the noise, exasperated at the man’s anger ruling his good sense, and turned back to see a panicking Frederick Chilton. He pulled out a shortsword that he had dangling on his belt and inched back towards his halberd setting against the wall.

“Will?” The elf in question looked at him blankly. They caught eyes and the blood drained from Chilton’s face. “What have you done?”

Will swallowed, and the weakness it betrayed caused Frederick’s face to harden. When instead of the man moving away, Frederick walked towards him, Will felt compelled to answer, “I sent a message to Jack Crawford.” The former High Seeker moved closer until he

was standing over Will, who was still seated. There wasn't going to be an easy way out of this now. Frederick shoved and hand out and grabbed Will, who grasped his wrist and tried to shove the man back.

All breath left him as he found himself shoved into the wall and his slowly clearing vision revealed that the shortsword was now pointed at his throat. Frederick was heaving, anger and fear clouding his head and eyes, and apparently faster than Will had expected. Neither man moved, but the storm that was Jack Crawford could be heard checking each and every room. He was on the floor beneath them. Will glanced to the door and the hand clutching his shoulder and pressing him into the wall clenched. He may not have been wearing armor, but the bony claw of his hand was just as sharp as a gauntlet. "You're not a killer, Frederick," Will whispered. The hand grasping him relaxed and slid down his shoulder, the one pointing the sword went limp and it clattered to the ground, creating a thin scratch on Will's neck marring his skin with droplets of blood.

Will watched the man before him sink to the ground and break. Idly, he wondered if this was how he had looked to Hannibal when every part of him had cracked. Frederick took several heaving breaths before he began to quietly sob, and Will edged around him. He was afraid to touch him, because it appeared that even the slightest nudge would have him fall further. He needed to hurry though; Jack would be there any second, and he wouldn't handle it well.

Just managing to get to the door before Jack, Will edged outside of it and closed it. The man approached, staring daggers at the barrier between him and the person he probably thought was the Highwayman. The elf took a swift glance around Jack and down the hall, perking his ears to see if he could hear anyone coming. There was no one else. Quietly, he inquired, "Why did you come alone Jack?"

Jack growled, "Let me by, Will."

More firmly, Will tried again. "Why did you come alone? I told you that everything isn't what it seems. The Highwayman is playing with us." He stared the man dead in the eye, which he could tell surprised Jack. Even within the last few months, he only rarely made eye contact. "All of us."

Nevertheless, his sincerity did nothing to sway the Seeker on a mission. "Well I'm not playing."

"He's not going to fight back. Are you just going to kill him? You may think otherwise, but you're not the law, you only enforce it."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Are you wagging the same tongue that gave the order to kill Hannibal Lecter?"

Gritting his teeth, Will spat back, "The difference is that Frederick isn't the Highwayman. Hannibal is."

"Frederick?" Jack scoffed. "**Frederick** is playing you, Will. You're too close to see that." He had the look of a man only interested in his own opinion. There wasn't really another option here. Much as he regretted it, Will was going to have to throw Frederick on Jack Crawford's

mercy and hope the man's natural patheticness would pull on the other man's conscience. Otherwise, he wasn't going to last. With the High Seeker dubbed a traitor and murderer, the next person probably to be in charge of the Bastion might be Jack. Will hoped that he was; it would make everything else much easier.

"Fine." Then, the elf allowed the human into the room. The moment Jack saw the sorry sight of Frederick Chilton, Will knew that he had him.

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The journey back to the Bastion was humiliating. The entire inn watched as he was led out in manacles, not even armor to hide behind. All they knew was that a man dressed in strange armor that drew on Chantry symbology was leading him out in chains and a nearby elf that he had entered with walked freely behind the both of them. Jack didn't bother trying to restrain anymore than he had, even letting the two of them stand side by side without supervision while he purchased a horse and cart. Another expense for the Seekers of Truth.

Everyone that saw the trio of them gawked, and the staring was grating, but it was nothing compared to the reception that he got when they got back to the Bastion the next morning. Chilton could see it in every one of their eyes. They were wondering how he got caught if he was so good, why he didn't try and go farther. Most of all, they were disparaging him and hating him for what he did and what he represented. It was remarkably similar to the way that Abel Gideon had been treated after he broke and massacred much of the Ghislain Circle, and it was driving him crazy. He was innocent!

Once they arrived back in the Bastion, Jack made excuses for Will and sent the young man off. Frederick scowled out the elf, but Will only glanced at him once. Then, he saw the young man make some sort of hand signal that took him a moment to recognize.

Be patient.

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Jack watched as the proceedings with Chilton came and went in a blurr. Despite the sheer amount of hatred and discontent that other people showed to the man, he was largely unresponsive. It was the kind of thing that Jack had seen before but hadn't expected out of the Highwayman. It was the same way that Will had behaved when he had first been apprehended as the Copy Killer. The unsatisfied feeling that came when he first arrested the man only grew stronger. Will had told him that Frederick Chilton wasn't the Highwayman, and he had believed it for only a split second.

Then, that second came back and lasted longer.

Now, he was absolute in his belief, but there wasn't anything he could do from here. Letting the man free with no evidence to the contrary purely on his gut feeling would get him laughed out of the Bastion and stripped of his rank. Furthermore, it wouldn't change the fact that Chilton would be hunted the moment he left; far too many people would gladly pursue the supposed Highwayman and put his head on a spike. For now, Jack needed to be patient. Unfortunately that meant allowing this farce to go through, but with sentencing he could

argue that Chilton needed to stay alive and here, much as the man had done for Will. Jack couldn't argue that it was for study, but he was sure that he could come up with something.

It didn't help that the only thing Chilton would say was, "I need to speak with Will." With what the drugs that they had found and what most thought he had done to Will, nobody wanted to let the Seeker near him, lest he try something fishy.

Alana wanted to be the one to confront him. Jack was perfectly willing to let her.

Upon seeing her, the former High Seeker immediately deflated. "They had to send you, an Initiate? It seems like one final insult added to this injury."

"I'm surprised," Alana responded coolly, hatred palpable. "For all of the time I've known you, you've never seemed like the type to hide an achievement."

Frederick growled out, "It's not mine."

"Whose is it then?" Alana couldn't help but taunt. "Hannibal Lecter's?" Jack felt someone sidle up next to him as they looked through the two-way mirror. Miriam Lass moved to his side, allowed in by Jimmy and Brian. She was staring entranced at the two, entire body tensed up to pounce. He side-eyed her and watched for a reaction.

"You're just saying words. You don't have the eyes or the will to see it," he muttered. "You're not even considering that they might be true."

"They're not, You were using the same techniques on Will that you did on Abel Gideon. We saw your log. You were absent from the Bastion for the same periods of time that the Highwayman was active, you have had that estate for the time that Miriam Lass would have been taken, and Will only got worse and started blaming Hannibal after he met you. You used your position in the Seekers of Truth to point the investigation in false directions and manipulate everyone around you," she snarled, hackles rising. Miriam put her hand on the glass and started pushing. Jack barely noticed it for a moment, but then her knuckles turned white. "Miriam?" he asked, trying to get her attention.

"You can't see it, and you won't see it, not until it's too late. Don't say I didn't warn you, Seeker Bloom."

That was when Miriam began smashing at the glass, which spider-webbed. Jack lunged to try and pull her away, but she kept screaming, "It's him! It's him!" Ragged nails from her hand scratched into his arms and she kicked out her feet, but her time under the Highwayman's care and the lack of one of her arms dealt a blow to her fighting prowess. She wasn't able to get the leverage to push out of his hold. Jack watched as both of the people in the room startled, Frederick remaining seated as he was chained to the table and Alana jumping up, with each ridiculously loud noise.

"It's him!" Miriam sobbed and went limp. He relaxed his hold for just a moment, but that's when she broke free and lunged towards the glass, shoving her whole body against it. It splintered and cracked, fracturing outwards. It sprayed out into the room, causing Alana to dive under the table to avoid being skewered. Chilton wasn't lucky enough and was pelted

with the shards. Miriam scrambled to her feet and went after the immobile man, Jack jumping through the glass after her.

The young woman, her life so taken apart by the Highwayman, grabbed one of the closest shards, slicing open her remaining hand with it. Then, in one swift movement, she stabbed down at him, piercing his chest. Then she raised her arm to stab again, hitting him somewhere in the face. Miriam raised it again, this time aiming for the neck, but Jack managed to intervene in time and disarm her. Swiftly, he pulled her away from the unmoving body and ordered someone to get a healer for the limp man.

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"What an utter mess!" exclaimed Lord Seeker Prurnell as she sharply closed the records they had uncovered about Frederick Chilton's ownership of the estate where they had found Abel Gideon and even had found further evidence that Miriam Lass had been kept there. There had been a host of other things seeded throughout the estate, including runestones like those used to fake Georgia Madchen's death and drugs that he had used on Abel Gideon (and likely Will as well). The formulas that had been written out to show various attempts at recreating qamek had been the weight that tipped the already moving scale.

"Well, it appears that we need to examine the dealings of Frederick Chilton and possibly other High Seekers," Kade commented as she wiped her brow with a handkerchief and sat back in the former High Seeker's desk. "While I doubt it will be anything this elaborate, we still need to keep better control of them. One should never have been in the position of getting away with multiple murders, but, despite everything that led here, it is good to finally have some sort of resolution to this."

Alana knew that this 'resolution' didn't actually fix much. All it did was take a horrible person out of power, but it still left her exactly where she was: a loose part in the contraption. She had yet to really find her place among Jack's squad without Beverly there and Will's return only served to make her feel more out of place. Nothing and everything had changed. She… she knew that Will had been hurt and manipulated. Looking back on her early actions made her feel ashamed of her initial response to him, but that still didn't change her overall feelings on him. If she wanted to make some sort of personal progress, Alana knew that she needed to move away from the issue. She once said that she always analyzed her feelings, but didn't act on them, yet here she was doing the opposite. It was time for her to take stock and responsibility.

"Seeing as we are down a High Seeker," Prurnell began, "I have seen it fit to promote you, Jack Crawford, as the current High Seeker of the Bastion d'Argent until further notice. We will discuss your new responsibilities on the morrow." Jack stiffened. Perhaps he once would have been thrilled at the promotion, but something had changed in the last month and his goals had altered dramatically. The expression on the man's face now was one of utter displeasure.

"Yes, Lord Seeker," he begrudgingly replied.

"Now-"

This was her chance!

“Lord Seeker,” Alana interrupted, which confused Jack and Kade, as Alana wasn’t the type to interrupt anyone if she could help it. “Lord Seeker, with everything that has happened, I was wondering if I could request a transfer. Just temporarily!” Jack looked betrayed, but Kade had a slowly spreading smile on her face.

“Is that what you wish?” she asked and Alana nodded.

“I feel like I need to amass as much knowledge as I can get. Perhaps I will return here, perhaps not, but I need to find my own place in the organization.” Every time she looked around now, Alana expected to run into Will, Georgia Madchen, and Miriam Lass. The victims of the Highwayman were like ghosts in their own right, alive though they may be.

It was time to figure out whom she was, and she couldn’t do that surrounded by the dead.

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As far as Hannibal Lecter was concerned, it had been an extremely successful day, one which he was currently celebrating with a delicious vintage of wine. His endeavors to turn attention away from him and close the case of the Highwayman had been achieved without too much frustration or difficulty, leaving him a free man until further notice. Miriam Lass and Georgia Madchen were out of the way for the time being, neither of which in a position to ruin or recognize him. He had already subtly lobbied that Madchen not be made Tranquil. He wasn’t sure how it worked exactly, but, on the off chance that she retained her memories, it wouldn’t be a good thing if she had no attachment to Will and Abigail. That was the only thing keeping her silent about him. Most importantly, Will was free and aware of his identity without it posing any danger to him. The only part that was disappointing was the fact that Will was not there with him. It was far too soon for the young man to be visiting, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t wistfully pining for his presence.

The sun was fully set, bathing the room in the reddish grey after-light, when Hannibal heard three sharp raps on the door. “Enter,” he called, and one of his servants walked in and bowed deeply.

“Your Lordship, you have a visitor.”

That was all it took, and Hannibal knew instantly who it was. “Let him in.” They bowed again as they backed out of the room and turned around once in the hallway. It seemed that Will was there to visit him after all. His nerves tingled with anticipation, although he was careful not to show it on his face. Now that he was free, Will was engaging with him outside of attempted murder. The excitement was breathtaking and he couldn’t wait to see the man that stepped out from the other side of the door.

A brusque knock came again, and once again he called for them to enter. It was only a single moment that passed between his summons and the door opening, and it passed by far too quickly for him to savor it as was his wont. The young man who entered was clearly an elf and obviously Will, but his dress and demeanor were off.

He glided rather than shuffled, and his clothes, while not unbefitting of his status in Orlesian society, were well-made and tailored. They were simple blues and browns with plain cuts, but they highlighted his form and the actual fabric appeared to be high quality. In contrast to the wildness that had exuded from him the last time the two had spoken, Will held himself properly and his curly hair was pulled back and trimmed. Perhaps most importantly, the elf was wearing a mask, the most recognizable symbol of the Grand Game. It evoked earthiness with shimmering lines of faint silver contouring the mask, seeming to match the markings that were on his face. The mask itself was nothing more than painted on plaster, but it was elegant in its simplicity. Should someone see him in it, they would easily mistake him for a favored servant, left guessing at his house, or think him a bard.

A deep and present part of himself wished to have Will's mask painted in his colors or replicating his symbol. Then, they would be allies and Will would be further associated with him. Nobody would be able to interfere in their game again, and they could play against everyone else. Who knew what kind of partner Will would make?

Hannibal couldn't help it; the corners of his mouth turned up. "Hello Will."

Will's face was mostly impassive, but still held a distinct air of confidence that Hannibal could revel in. "Thank you for allowing me in, your Lordship."

"It was no trouble at all," he replied without thinking. After a moment, he added, "Unless you plan to harm me with spells?"

Will grinned. "Not tonight." Hannibal gestured for the elf to have his pick of the seating, and he glanced at the open bottle and the presentation of the room. One eyebrow cocked, he asked, "Are you expecting someone?"

"Only you."

Will took a seat and crossed one leg over the other. The posture was an attempt at asserting power, but Hannibal saw through it easily. Still, he allowed it. The mask did an impressive job of hiding the skin around his eyes, but the check of his jaw was still visible, and it meant he could see it twitch and click. "I wasn't sure if I was going to come here tonight, but it was going to happen sooner or later. I believe that confronting this sooner is better for the both of us."

"This?"

Will exhaled through his mouth, allowing the emotion to be audible in the gust of air. "My feelings about you. I think it's best if I do that directly."

A thrill rushed through him, but he was careful to show no visible change. "Of course, you must first grieve for what is lost and what has changed. It is the most important and vital step."

"I've changed. You've changed me."

Hannibal nodded, acknowledging Will's pain. "We cannot go back. The friendship that we had is over, and nothing can erase the hurts we dealt each other in its wake. Much as the Highwayman is over."

"You denied Miriam her closure. Her chance to take her life back."

"My hope was to give it to her, but that didn't work out." Hannibal tilted his head, studying Will's response carefully. "How will you take your life back?"

A smirk. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

How could he say no? "I most certainly would." The noble joined him in the chairs and crossed his own legs to mirror the other. "Where shall we begin?"

Chapter End Notes

I'll admit that when I first wrote it, I had a difficult time figuring out what I wanted to do with Alana. We all know that her writing in the second season wasn't great, mostly between episode 5 and the end of episode 11. The Alana in this story is characterized differently and motivated by different things. I'll talk more about this in the codex when I finish up on writing how I've had to approach violence. I knew that in order to get Will to a certain place, he needs to feel isolated, which is difficult when the characters are simply more inclined to be accepting or supportive, Alana being the most likely. I don't like writing her out of the story, but Alana also needs to be in a specific place for chapter 11. I've tried a couple of things to keep her voice in at least one scene per chapter to see how she's doing and growing, but it's difficult.

Enfenim eluvian

Chapter Summary

"Alas, so long as the music plays, we dance." - Flemeth, Dragon Age: Inquisition

Alternatively:
"I am not bait!"
"Hush, just look pretty."
- Cullen Rutherford and Leliana, Dragon Age: Inquisition

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited
Couple of things: I'm going to try and make sure you guys get one a week for the next couple of months while I try to catch up. I've already got it planned so that the last one ends on the day that it should have be published and then its back to every two weeks. Emphasis on try though, because I'm returning to school for another bachelor's after a year off.

Yes, I took the story directly from The Masked Empire. No I did not change much of the wording. I like it the way Felassan tells it and it was hard to rework it without taking some of the meaning. I'll also admit that Mason is probably a bit savvier by necessity. The Orlesian court does not suffer fools with ambition for long.
I also spent a lot of my time editing this listening to the bard songs. This one in particular (I'm using the fan cover because I like it better):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxSrBDiL-90

Enfenim eluvian: To fear a mirror, Mirror of Fear

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tears fell from Margot's eyes as her brother's knee pressed into her back. Her arm was wrenched behind her, pain so strong that it exuded from the pores and took over whatever feeling arms' were supposed to have. Instead, it was a mass of misery attached to her shoulder. She was no healer, but there was a very strong chance that it was broken. Mason's hand stroked her cheek and she pressed herself further on the floor to get away from it. Servants were scurrying away just out of her sight, but their footsteps were excruciatingly loud as shoes dragged across the floor. Her brother had only had control of the estate for less than a month, and the staff were already as terrified of him as they had been their father.

Margot hoped that the ones with families took her advice and found another noble to serve or at least hid the existence of their children from Mason. As far as she knew, only one or two hadn't managed to do so in time, and she had helped them get away as fast as she could behind Mason's back. The alternative had been clearly shown to them, so there was no misunderstanding the consequences. He especially had a fondness for elven ones; Mason claimed that they were unnaturally pretty.

It was disgusting as far as Margot was concerned and she had finally gotten the courage to do something about it. Her dagger laid several yards away from her, having clattered to the floor before she managed to do real damage. There was a small hint of satisfaction that came with the knowledge that she had made him bleed, but the nick near his eye that was pouring blood onto her hair and face as he leaned over her wasn't what she would normally call a success.

"Oh, Margot," Mason sing-songed. "That wasn't very smart. What am I going to do with you?" He lifted a gloved finger and daintily wiped away a teardrop, before he stuck it in his mouth and then grinned. "Very rare to get weeping from you. I should do this kind of thing more often." He leaned all of his weight on his knee which caused her to cry out with the flash it sent up her back. "Don't worry Margot. I'm not going to kick you out. I need you just as much as you need me. But! I am nervous about future behavior. I don't want to encourage you to do this again. Give me a small while to think on it, and then we can talk again."

He stepped away from her and several guards came into the room, pulling her up from the floor. "Take her to the healer and then the dungeon. Don't want her getting any ideas."

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She was overall reluctant to see him, but Alana knew that she would have to do this before she left. Once Will learned about the Katz family's wish to have their daughter burned with a cedar branch, he knew that they would have appreciated an elven burial as well. It was good to see that some city elves still cling to the old ways, and it allowed him to privately grieve his friend and show the Creators that she was worthy to be by their sides. It had happened basically the moment after he had been released, and he had gone out of his way to ask for their permission to do so. They leapt at the opportunity to have a Dalish, especially a former First to officiate.

The entire squad wished to attend as well, wanting to see how Dalish funeral rites were carried out as well as to give themselves one more moment to breathe. Beverly's ashes were scattered to the winds, which had irritated Will, but that's when Alana offered up the one thing she could think of. It seemed like so long ago when she bought the necklace, thinking of the deceased Abigail, and gave it to Beverly instead. The young woman hadn't worn it, but did keep it in her personal belongings. When everybody had the task of going through their former comrade's personal effects, she had snagged it. It hadn't been difficult to offer it up.

Will brought them to a copse to perform the rite along with a small cart that held a sapling carefully prepared for the journey. Together, the group dug a hole where enough sunlight would reach and not be overtaken by the surrounding trees so that their little sapling would grow.

“Seeing as we don’t have a body, this will do,” Will said and took the necklace from Alana. He wrapped it around an oak staff and entwined the remaining chain around a cedar branch before dropping it in. He looked to them and explained, “When the Dalish bury our dead, we give them the staff to help them walk the path in the Beyond as Falon’din is no longer present to walk with them. We give them the branch so that they may scatter the ravens of Dirthamen, Fear and Deceit, for they have grown restless without him to guide them.” The cedar branch. That was what it was for. Alana stared at Will’s vallaslin, remembering that he said it was for Dirthamen. For the first time, she realized that the stylized markings going up his nose to his forehead was meant to emulate a raven. If only she could remember what elven gods meant what.

Will spoke a few words over the ground, audible so that everyone would be a part of this ritual. “O Falon'Din. Lethanavir–Friend to the Dead. Guide my feet, calm my soul. Lead me to my rest.” Then, he pulled the sapling from the cart, shrugging off any attempts at aid, and planted in the soil, right above where the necklace was. “We plant trees above our fallen kin to show that even though we may have died, our spirits and our souls live on. It is the hope of our people.” Then, he started shoveling the dirt to surround the tree, and motioned for the others to join, which they did without a second’s thought. “We call these Vallasdahlen. They are life trees.”

Once everyone had joined in planting the sapling, Will began to sing. His voice wasn’t spectacular, but its grieving timbre echoed through the trees.

“Tel’enara bellana bana’vhenadahl/Sethen’a ir san’shiral, mala tel’halani/Ir sa’vir te’suledin var bana’vallaslin/Vora’nadas san banal’him emma abel revas./Ir tela’ena glandival, vir amin tel’hanin./Ir tela las ir Fen halam, vir am’tela’elvahen.”

He repeated the lyrics until the roots were submerged, then wiped his brow of sweat and tears and turned to the others. “We dedicate this tree to the life of Beverly Katz. May she walk the paths of the Beyond without fear and join the People in rest.”

None of the rest of them quite knew what to say. They were raised by the Chantry, and any words that they had felt inadequate in the face of Will’s display of emotions. They had already seen one aspect of his grief, but this one felt far more personal. So, they dispersed. Jimmy and Brian took the front of the cart, driving it back to the Bastion. Alana and Jack stayed with Will in the back, which was much more comfortable with the baby tree no longer clogging up the interior.

“What were you singing, Will?” Alana asked and he started before looking embarrassed.

“I don’t know if I’d call it singing,” he said shyly and rubbed the back of his neck. “And I’m honestly not sure. I heard it at a few funerals growing up, but the song is more ancient elven. We know that some things have changed over time, so the best I have is a guess.”

“And?”

He sighed. “We lost the ruined tree that is now our People. Time won’t help when the land of dreams is no longer ours. We try to lead despite the eventual failing of our dedication. We are committed to the inevitable and troubling freedom. When we no longer believed, we lost our

glory to war. When the Wolf won, we lost the People to war." The elf among them sighed, not sure how to explain it to them. Alana wasn't sure she would understand if he tried. "It's not a perfect translation, but that's the closest I can get." It was sad, how much his people had lost.

Just another thing to grieve. Soon, though, Alana would be gone. When they arrived back at the Bastion, she would pack her things and head out with a group leaving for the capital. It was for the best.

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"I could make it official, you know," Jack Crawford said to him after they left the Bastion for a mid-day trip to the forest. They had been invited to Hannibal Lecter's estate in Verchiel for dinner, but Will had insisted that they be the ones to provide the meat, much to the Comte's minor offense. So, he asked for the Seeker of Truth, now High Seeker of the Bastion d'Argent, to accompany him… mostly because Will was a terrible hunter. He hadn't been great before his incarceration and the lack of practice did nothing to improve his aim. Dreaming about hunting and actually working the crossbow after months of not touching one were two very different things.

"Make what official?" Will asked, curious about where Jack was going with this. They had barely made it into the sparse forest that surrounded the Bastion before the conversation had started. Will was being careful to steer them clear of Beverly's tree. He wasn't quite ready to see it again. Not yet at least.

"I could make you a Seeker. I'm a High Seeker. I can do that now."

Will paused, actually considering what that would mean. The position would offer a certain amount of protection, but it came with a multitude of responsibilities and, being what he was as both an elf and a mage, a massive amount of scrutiny. "I don't know, Jack. If I'm going to catch Hannibal off-guard, running around in a breastplate with the emblem and abilities of the Seekers of Truth isn't going to help," he excused.

Jack rolled his eyes. "You could just say no."

Will shrugged. "I could."

"So, what's the plan with Lecter: wine and dine?"

A rush of hooves to the right signaled both men that they had scared off prey with their talking. It was all Will needed to know. Until this conversation was taken care of, neither of them were going to actually get anywhere. To be fair, he did need to be clearer with Jack on his plan. "I know you're Chantry folk, but how much do you know of elven lore?"

That confused Jack. "Not much? I know some of the gods and that you have two sets the… Creators and the Forbidden Ones?"

Will snorted. "The Forgotten Ones. The Forbidden Ones are those demons that you lot go on about."

“Sorry.”

“What do you know of Fen’harel?”

Jack frowned. “Isn’t that the… Dread Wolf? He was the one that locked away the elven gods and destroyed the elven people. He’s evil?”

“Yes and no. He did lock away the gods and he is the Lord of Tricksters, but we don’t regard him as pure evil. He’s somewhere in the middle. My Keeper once told me a story about him. The purpose of the story was to say that the Dread Wolf is on no one’s side but will save the innocent, however I think there is a different lesson to be learned.”

Jack regarded him curiously and nodded for him to continue. Will racked his mind for as much of the tale as he could; it had been roughly a decade since he last heard it told. “The god Fen'Harel was asked by a village to kill a great beast. He came to the beast at dawn, and saw its strength, and knew it would slay him if he fought it. So instead, he shot an arrow up into the sky. The villagers asked Fen'Harel how he would save them, and he said to them, 'When did I say that I would save you?' And he left, and the great beast came into the village that night and killed the warriors, and the non-fighting men and women, and the elders. It came to the children and opened its great maw, but then the arrow that Fen'Harel had loosed fell from the sky into the great beast's mouth, and killed it. The children of the village wept for their parents and elders, but still they made an offering to Fen'Harel of thanks, for he had done what the villagers had asked. He had killed the beast with his cunning, and a slow arrow that the beast never noticed.” Will turned his head to Jack and regarded the man's stony expression, the rustling behind him. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Jack glanced up into the forest and drew his bow. “I think I do.” Then, he fired.

Will watched carefully as Hannibal went about preparing their meal. Seeing as it was just the three of them attending, the noble had sent the servants to do other duties in the house. It was strange, watching them glance at him out of the corner of their eyes. Each time they did so, their gaze fell on the mask he wore that would single him out as a very important servant or a bard. Considering that it didn’t belong to any houses, the knowledgeable ones would call him the latter, which made servants nervous. There were almost no elf bards. It was a strange feeling, being feared for something besides magic.

The blade cut through the vegetables swiftly before the chef put the ones that were to remain cold aside and put the rest in a pan. Hannibal had decided to go all out with the dish, cooking a roast Orlesian style with several garnishes and some sort of intricate sauce that Will hadn’t bothered to learn the name of. A quick glance revealed that Hannibal had been watching his observation of the noble’s technique rather than where his hands were going, which impressed the elf. The knife had not once strayed near the hand, nor slowed to accommodate for the lack of attention being given to his strikes.

“The food should be done shortly,” Hannibal told him. “If you would be so kind as to entertain Seeker Crawford while I finish here.” At Will’s dubious look, he added, “It will take another twenty minutes or so, but the time will lengthen considerably with you here to distract me.” Will was not very impressed with Hannibal’s response, but the flirtation had come so out of nowhere that he retreated anyway. It would be a lie if he said that it hadn’t made him uncomfortable, likely the noble’s goal. He had insisted on watching the proceedings to make sure that no funny business (i.e. putting people meat in) was done to the food, and now he was being urged out. Will wasn’t much of a chef, but it looked like it would be difficult to add such a thing unless Hannibal had it secretly cooking somewhere, so he left.

Unhappily.

He and Jack talked lightly in the other room, neither really engaging as both of their minds were on the one in the kitchen. They couldn’t have a meaningful conversation anyway. With everything that had happened recently, both of their lives were caught up in the Highwayman. Actively conversing would bring that around and they couldn’t afford to with Hannibal Lecter in the other room. Not that they didn’t talk about important things, Jack mentioned Bella on multiple occasions, but Will at least felt like they were held back by the present company.

Twenty minutes passed and the head of house finally graced them with his presence fully. He was carrying a steaming dish, made to look as grotesque as possible, likely as rebellion for having to cook regular food; Will saw a warming rune on the bottom, which seemed like it would come in handy. For being a mundane human, the Comte used a lot of magic. Most were afraid to even use runestones, as they thought it was connected somehow. “This was a beautiful deer,” Hannibal greeted his guests with.

His reply took almost no thought, “It was our turn to provide the meat.”

His Lordship didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he spent several careful, precious minutes plating up their food in precise portions before sitting and then addressing Will. “I do hope that ‘providing the meat’ doesn’t mean you still harbor doubts about what I serve at my table.” While Will was the person he was speaking directly to, neither missed the look he flashed at Jack. What had Jack done before Will had gotten out?

Will didn’t get time to shoot a reply; Jack did so for him. “No doubts, your Lordship. Only the wounds we dealt each other before we got to the truth.” It was probably a good thing that he didn't. Will might not have been able to resist poking at the noble when they needed to proceed delicately right now.

Smiling warmly, which appeared false to Will, Hannibal gently chastised Jack, “When we are in relaxed company, you must address me as Hannibal, Jack. Unless you would rather me call you Seeker Crawford?”

“Hannibal then.”

“And our past wounds are precisely why we need to move past apologies and forgiveness. Frederick Chilton has many more victims besides the dead.” He looked to Will. “My biggest regret was that you were in his clutches for so long.” Will didn’t appreciate his vocabulary as

it made him sound like a damsel in distress, nor did he appreciate that such an obvious lie sounded like it was true. Jack glanced at Will with an expression that clearly told him to keep his mouth shut. Will was way ahead of him. Hannibal continued, “We will absorb this experience and it will change us.”

“None of our actions were personal,” Jack replied, so smooth in his delivery. Will had to hand it to the man; his air of bluntness made people forget that he knew how to play the game just as well as any courtier. The man had been hunting the Highwayman for years and still managed to keep his cool with the monster in sight, while Will was fighting himself not to insult or insinuate.

He didn’t succeed. “I tried to have Hannibal killed. Isn’t that personal?”

Hannibal pointed out, “You thought I was a killer.” Will didn’t correct him by saying that the correct term was ‘knew’.

Jack covered, “I don’t blame Miriam Lass for attacking Frederick Chilton. I wanted to kill him myself. If I were to disregard you for doing something similar, I’d be a hypocrite.”

“We need each other,” Hannibal replied, and Will had the abrupt feeling that he was being caught between these two men. Both of them had a rope tied down on either side, jerking him one way or the other. He was clearly on Jack’s side; he had to be. It was the right thing to be. “The greatest crime now would be to walk away from all that we’ve shared and suffered.” Will so badly wanted to, but life rooted him there. “We’re the only ones who will know what this feels like.”

The elf shoved a bite in his mouth to keep from saying something that he would regret. “This is delicious.” It probably could have sounded more sincere.

The rest of the meal went as well as it was to be expected. That night, back in his bunk and away from the prying eyes of his fellows, Will wasn’t quite sure how to feel. Jack’s offer of making him a Seeker was something he was considering more with each passing minute. Something about the idea made him feel like it would grant more legitimacy to his mission and allow him to not feel like an outsider any longer among the people he would work with day in and out. If Will was a Seeker, they might feel less need to watch his every move (not that they were doing a good job of it), and he might actually find a place that would accept him.

It was unlikely, but he was allowed wishful thinking on occasion.

In the room next to his, Will could hear Jimmy and Brian rustling about and trying to figure out their next move. The more he slept in the room nearby, the more he got used to hearing their voices as the night moved onward. It was strange to find them so calming now, especially considering their utter lack of interaction when he was incarcerated. Neither of them had come to visit him, but they both had apologized for this and their lack of belief once he was free. Maybe the normalcy of the bickering helped him remember that he was no longer in that dank and dark cell. It didn’t work all of the time. Occasionally, he found the walls curling in on him, weighing down with ill intent. Any cramped space did. Still, as his

thoughts drifted off without him, he felt the warm blanket of exhaustion settle. Without knowing, he had fallen asleep.

The sun rose on his face the next morning when he awoke from the first dreamless sleep he had had in months. It warmed his face, keeping him content. As far as Will knew, he didn't have anywhere to go today. Jack hadn't said anything to him about a scene or training or anything of any sort. That left him alone in the room he had been going to share with Alana. It was strange and it wasn't to know that she had elected to train elsewhere. The room was devoid of any personal objects unlike when he first saw it. It was probably for the best; Will wasn't sure what kind of nightmares would come in the ensuing months while he went up against Hannibal. This kind of game was dangerous, and the elf had no clue what toll it would take on his psyche. He knew that he occasionally yelled in his sleep, so it might be better to find a different arrangement. It was something to look into.

Will laid in bed for a few minutes, ruminating on his thoughts. It was surprising how tiring it could be just to remind himself of what was to come and what had been, especially when the morning was so nice. He glanced at the window and watched the sun rising over the dead fields of the Exalted Plains, deciding that such a fine morning shouldn't be ruined by plagues of disturbing or upsetting thoughts. So, Will got up, got dressed, and went outside, determined to sit in the courtyard and bask in the sun. Perhaps he could snag a few books from the Bastion's limited library or bring out his notebook for studying. Whatever he decided to do, it would be something more than sleeping or meditating. He had the option now.

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Jack was solemn as he stared at Miriam, her eyes intent on the black horse lying dead on its side. They had been called to the stables of Baron Clark Ingram at extremely early in the morning, and no one felt like insulting another noble after the incident with Frederick Chilton and Hannibal Lecter. The man had gone so far as to demand the presence of the new High Seeker to make sure that this mystery was solved by him personally. If only Jack was lucky enough to be near someone that was reasonable. In his opinion, that was the overall problem with the nobles of the Dales. Due to the history of the land that their vassals and their estates were on, they seemed to have this overwhelming need to assert their authority. This left the more reasonable people around them with the misfortune of having to deal with it.

Baron Clark Ingram was a minor noble from a family that had been disgraced enough in their previous attempts at the Game that the Ingrams had gone to Ferelden when it was ruled over by Orlais. When the Fereldans took it back, they violently kicked out the Orlesian nobles that had not bothered to integrate with their society (which was all of them). Thus, they returned, but Emperor Florian was not inclined to make things easy for them. The Ingrams were given a bit of fertile land in the Dales so that they could still be called nobles, and everything else was up to them. As far as Jack was aware, they hadn't done much to improve their station, but Celene was in just enough of a mood with the Chantry and Divine Beatrix III that she would bring the Ingrams back into favor to dress them down. There was a good chance that Clark Ingram was banking on their dismissiveness so that would happen, but Jack knew the Game and, even more importantly, knew how to grin and bear it. So, they went and tolerated his nonsense.

The reason that Miriam was staring at the dead horse was actually only half a foot next to it. The horse had been opened up by a few stablehands that had found her dead. They had come in and checked her before noticing that she still appeared pregnant, despite having had a stillborn foal days before. What they found instead was the body of a young woman, appearing to have been recently strangled to death. The two of them, Miriam and Jack, stood off to the side while Jimmy and Brian worked on processing the scene. It was haunting to look at.

“This kind of mutilation often presents itself as cult activity.”

Miriam muttered, “I would have said blood magic, but I’m pretty sure that needs to come from a living person.”

Jimmy, busy trying to place the young woman on a tarp to take back to the Bastion, shrugged. “Usually. Every time I’ve seen attempts with animals or corpses, they usually fail. We have a few theories, mostly on the life essence needing to be connected to a soul, but have no real proof,” he said, and Jack filed away his information for later. Being an ex-Templar, Jimmy was the one that knew the most about blood magic. He continued, “From what we’ve learned about cults and religions that involve animal sacrifice, the perception is that the animals need to be healthy. Otherwise, the power of the best won’t transfer over.”

“This horse was dying,” Miriam told Jack.

“Um.. Even despite them cutting out a woman from it, the womb is basically intact. She was dead before they put her in, likely strangled.”

Jimmy turned to Jack like he was remembering something else. “She put up a fight.” Jack had said those words before, in regards to Abigail Hobbs and Will.

Miriam interrupted Jack’s thoughts, not allowing him to continue down the trail he was walking. “She came from the womb? Was it meant to be a rebirth? It’s likely that the killer thought this was a transformation. Jack, something’s off. I don’t understand why he’s done it like this. He doesn’t think like a normal person might. If he wanted her to live, to give her new life, why kill her?”

Why indeed? People did a lot of things to those that they professed to care about in the name of helping them. It was a form of evil that Jack didn’t feel comfortable sitting with, staring at the negative of his actions and those taken by people around him. It was grieving, how cruel and disturbing the world could be.

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Mason had decided to be more merciful than usual. He had only kept her in the dungeon for two nights.

Margot’s initial hope when he took over the Verger household was that the Grand Duke would notice that her brother was a sack of shit and either have him stripped of his titles or just kill them. It soon became very clear why that wasn’t going to happen. The problem was that Marquis Molson Verger had been a chevalier and had even trained with Grand Duke

Gaspard de Chalons. The two had been good friends as both had abhorred the Game, but still managed to play, and believed in codes of honor. The Chevalier Code. The problem was that the Chevalier Code meant honor when dealing with nobility and didn't mean anything when it came to peasants, especially elven ones. The problem was that the Grand Duke had such affection for his comrade that he was blind to the abuse heaped on his children and then the tendencies of the Marquis's firstborn, especially after Molson's death.

The Grand Duke was going to do nothing, because he fondly remembered a man, a brother-in-arms, that never truly existed and was determined to see the same man in his comrade's son. If Margot wanted to depose her brother, she would have to get someone that would and could oppose him without worry that they would completely decimate her family's reputation. They also had to be accepting of what her father was not: Margot was only interested in women. This would make it difficult for her to get an heir. Once upon a time, she would have protested any marriage just for money or legacy, but times were desperate. If it meant saving her life and keeping the estate, then she would agree to it; they just had to be understanding that she was not attracted to them, which was difficult for some men to get in their heads. While she could just try to cut and run, her pride would not allow it. That money was hers just as much as it was Mason's, and she would not concede to his wishes. Molson may not have ever intended this, but his daughter was an experienced player of the Game. She knew how to run a gambit better than Mason ever did.

With Lord Froideveaux gone, there was a power in Verchiel that could stand against her brother. When her father's health had gone into full decline, the Verger daughter had been ecstatic to learn that Comte Hannibal Lecter had taken over the estate in full and was living there. While a Comte was not as powerful as a Marquis, Mason had been riding on the back of her father's success and had not tried to form alliances or make deals on his own yet. If he kept it up, he would topple himself by not bothering to advance, but, in this matter, Margot would never settle for anything less than a guarantee. He would go down, and she was going to Hannibal Lecter to make sure that the results landed firmly in her favor.

To give him sympathy for her, Margot made sure to go as soon as she was released from the dungeon. It was under the guise of a shopping trip, which her brother had notoriously little interest in, so she was able to send a servant off with her petty allowance from Mason to get some of the latest fashions. At the same time, Margot went to Comte Lecter, bruises still on her neck and broken arm still wrapped in a sling. She didn't like the word victim or how people treated people with that label, but right now she could use it to her advantage. He allowed her in with little interrogation, ever the gracious host his reputation made him out to be.

"Lady Verger, you are no more at fault for what happened to you than if you had been bitten by a mad dog," he said after she explained the bare bones of the situation. The noblewoman gave as much knowledge as she could afford to Hannibal Lecter without making it seem like her words were a misdirect. She didn't give him the exact specifics, just enough to garner at least irritation for her brother. It was a delicate balance. Too little and he wouldn't be motivated to help her, but too much and he might suspect her of trying to set him up.

Margot grimaced. "Unfortunately, mad dogs are put down."

“Was that what you hoped to accomplish when you attacked your brother?” he asked, his dark and glittering eyes reading her every expression. If Margot didn’t know any better, she would have suspected that she wasn’t wearing her mask properly. Her anxiety about this attempt (both for what would happen during and then after) had prevented her from even leaving the estate without checking herself over at least five times.

“What I hoped to accomplish, I suppose. I went about it all the wrong way. He is still alive, and now I have a broken arm and bruised pride for it,” Margot replied. His own expression hadn’t changed much since she met him face to face. It wasn’t disinterested or disdainful, but there was a decidedly neutrality to it that might have put her at ease in other situations. In this one, it only increased her nerves.

“Did it feel good to try and kill your brother?”

The question threw her off-guard. “Trying wasn’t terribly satisfying.” She wondered if succeeding would be.

“Are you going to try again?”

Narrowed eyes preceded the response. “Here’s where confiding gets tricky. You can always take what I say and run with it. You could go to Gaspard, my brother, or another noble entirely and use it against me.” The openness about the thought process wasn’t ideal, but there wasn’t a way that she could think of replying that wasn’t downright rude or condescending. Here, at least, he received an explanation and it showed off her own talent with the Game. “Anything I choose to reveal to you in confidence could easily leave the room through you or your servants. Everyone knows what my brother is capable of, but very few have anything to say about my response to it.”

“Be that as it may, you don’t have many other options, Margot. You have to protect yourself in some capacity, and that could mean taking chances.” He smiled, sleight though it may be it was the first expression that she had seen on him all visit. “It might actually be good for you personally to kill him.”

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Jack watched as his team examined the young woman’s body, trying to find the missing piece of the puzzle that came with their original assessment of the murder. Miriam had been right to point out how the display of the kill seemed religious, so they were trying to see if there were any symbolic markings or other clues on the body for them. Jimmy was returning from checking the deceased’s personal belongings and finding out her identity, while Brian was examining the corpse itself and showing Miriam the tips and tricks of the trade. It was a relief for Jack to see her engaging with them; it almost felt like she was going to be okay someday.

Jimmy returned, announcing to the room, “Her name is Sarah Craber, and she was a horse groom at the stables for local Baron, Clark Ingram.” Jack made a sour face at the mention of Baron Ingram. He was still trying to compensate for the whole mess during Orlais’ hold over Ferelden, which made him unpleasant to anyone that wasn’t a noble (and even then, most found him unpleasant).

“There's a hand spread on her neck, but no other liquid as far as we can tell. Only stuff from the horse.” Miriam grimaced at Brian’s cavalier attitude, but didn’t comment on it otherwise. Seeing death as much as they did put a lot of things into perspective, including how people interacted with it on a day-to-day basis. For Jimmy and Brian, that meant humor.

She turned towards Jack, “We were trying to examine her neck and throat in case there was anything internally, but it’s obstructed.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And you didn’t bother trying to unobstruct it?”

Brain quickly interjected, “We were just about to before Jimmy arrived with news of her identity. It seemed prudent to wait until all available information was known before proceeding.”

Jack rolled his eyes. That was Brian for ‘I was thinking about it, but got caught up with something else’. It was fairly typical of the alchemist, so he wasn’t worried about it affecting his efficiency and dedication; it hadn’t before. “It’s going to be a bit involved, as it appears to be packed with soil, going fairly deep down. Anything we were looking for earlier had been checked, but the fact that someone bothered to pack in dirt made me feel like we needed to check further.”

“Be my guest,” Jack supplied and gestured to the body. Both of them quickly took up tools and prodded deep. Miriam had to be the one to hold her mouth open so that Brian’s access wasn’t blocked. Jimmy and Jack had to hang back; more hands meant more things in the way. A few short jerks and then a puff of air came out of the mouth, startling Miriam and causing the rest of them (minus Brian) to move backwards.

Brain carefully held up the patch of dirt. “I suppose we could try and guess where this came from-” he laid his hand down on the body- “but I figured that having something with some sort of evidence on it might help la-.” Then, the alchemist jumped several feet in the air and stared down at the corpse with unabashed confusion. “What was that?”

“What?” asked Jimmy. “What was what?”

Brian only pushed his hands down on the chest further, much to the general confusion of those around. For several long seconds, Brain held fast without moving, clearly gauging for something only he knew about it. “She has a heartbeat.”

Jack scoffed while the others sputtered. “No. It’s not possible.”

“Come here and check!”

He motioned quickly to take her pulse, before Brian gently moved his hand elsewhere. “I’m not talking about a pulse, I know that she’s dead. It’s just that I could feel the pressure with my hand when I rested it here. What could possibly cause something like that? Is she undead?”

Jack pressed down, feeling the gentle lub-dub under his hand. “It’s not a heart, not hers anyway. Something is beating.” Quickly, Jack motioned for them to get tools, and they

gathered around. A hunting knife, freshly cleaned, was used to cut the body open, and Jimmy shuffled over with a bar and crank contraption used for spreading open tight objects. They positioned it between the ribs and began turning it, watching as the bones cracked and bent with the force of it. Miriam got closer and leaned over the gap before Jack could stop her, trying to see what was inside. Several long moments passed.

Something hurled itself out of the cavity with a flutter of wings, rushing up to the beams spread above their heads to hold supplies and keep the building stable. The entire crew ducked for cover, but Jack held fast, his instincts recognizing that it wasn't a threat. The starling chirped down at them from its perch, curious at the humans that were cowering from it. It was at this point that Jack felt it was safe to bring Will in on the case; things had gone from strange to bizarre.

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Everyone had been fairly tight-lipped around him yesterday, not giving him a single clue about whatever it was that they were looking into. The explanation that he had been given was that it was technically classified and that the higher-ups in the Chantry were scrutinizing them closer now that Will was working with them on an even more official basis. Anything that Jack wanted Will on, he needed to have proof that it was necessary. Once it hit morning, Jack had come to him immediately and told him to pack a day bag. Evidently, he was going to see what happened after all.

It was the stables of a local noble. Evidently his tenets were the farmers that surrounded the hold, but he didn't really have a township, so he remained a Baron and was actually subject to the Grand Duke. The place reeked, not that the odor was unexpected. The problem was that the sharp tang of blood and death mixed in with the dung-and-farm to create something truly vomit-inducing. He gagged periodically for several minutes while taking the whole thing in. Privately, Will also thought some very unflattering things at the Baron for forcing the animals to stay there and not finding them a new shelter. He came to the vacant stall where he was told they found the body of a young woman, Sarah Crabber, inside of a horse. The stable hands had identified her and also mentioned the horse had been sick from having a stillborn foal. Grief that killed.

He closed his eyes.

The world was bleaker than he expected, but more disjointed. Somewhere in the distance, there was an ever present cackling. There was a disconnect between the murderer's thoughts and Will's while he was distracted by the noise. A glance showed that there was a demon waiting for him. It took a moment for him to realize that it was one of desire, to which Will raised an eyebrow. "Can I help you?" he asked.

It grinned, far too wide. The elf had always been under the impression that desire demons were seducers of the highest form, very careful about appearing as appealing as possible. "Perhaps, but I can help you as well. You are facing such a difficult choice after all," it purred. It also occurred to Will that this one presented as masculine. All of the desire demons that he had encountered in the past were feminine in appearance. Very, and uncomfortably, feminine. The nipple tassels left little to the imagination, and were still present here.

After his brief observation, Will succinctly replied, "Not interested."

"Are you sure?"

"As far as I'm aware, I am not lusting after anything at present."

It grinned wider, almost splitting its face open, much like Sutcliffe's had appeared. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I'm a choice spirit, and I can see that you have a big one looming over you. I'm a big fan of watching people make choices, and there's one that you want to make so very badly, but there's something keeping you from it."

Will raised an unimpressed eyebrow as the demon drew closer, trying to demolish the distance between them. He would not be cowed. "Do you?"

"I do," it breathed in his face. It had happened in a blink. One moment, it was several yards away from him, then it was directly in front of him. The speed in which it occurred was disorienting. "You want to hate."

"Hate?"

"Yes," it hissed. "You want to hate so badly, but your natural empathy and compassion refuse to let you. No matter how hard you try, you understand, even despite yourself."

Will growled, "Understanding someone does not mean that you can't hate them. Oftentimes, it can lead to the opposite."

"Ah, but you don't just understand. You know motivation intimately, you feel it with him. I'm not saying that you aren't upset, but you can't hate him, no matter how you try. If you would like, I can help you make that decision. I wouldn't presume that you would ask me to kill him for you; you would like the honor of exacting vengeance to be kept for yourself. You can choose, however, to let me help you hate him."

He huffed and rebuked the 'choice spirit' for trying to tempt in, despite the fact that he knew it was right. It had been so easy to despise Hannibal when locked in a dungeon, but the man went out of his way, risked himself, to get Will out. Clearly it hadn't been personal. Even Beverly's death was understandable as it was out of self-preservation, as furious as it had made him. "Leave me alone. Find some other prey," he retorted and walked away.

It only laughed louder. "Go ahead and try for it alone, if that's what you want. I think I'll have more fun seeing what you choose. If you ever change your mind, call for Imshael." Will's blood went cold as he looked back to the place where the demon had been, but it was gone. Imshael. Somehow, Will had attracted one of the dreaded Forbidden Ones, powerful demons, and very very old. He had been flippant with Jack about them earlier. While Will wasn't sure if he believed the tales that said the Forbidden Ones were the ones that taught humans blood magic, he did believe that they were very powerful. If he was not careful, this could end extremely badly. Whatever the cause may be, there was one thing Will knew for certain.

The next time that he was in this specific area, he would be careful not to dream.

With the encounter over, he resumed his original purpose, much as there was a certain amount of anxiety building up in him. He wanted to get it over with and get out of the Fade.

He entered the stables, watching the horse stalls warily. They stamped nervously and pranced in place. A few of them leaned heads out for treats, but were not appeased. Not this time, at least. He knew why they were so antsy, one of their own was good as dead. As he went through, he put hoods on them, as gently as possible. Then, he located the dead-horse-to-be and led it to a more comfortable stall. There, he cautiously sedated it and laid it down. For a while, he watched its labored breathing until it finally slowed to a stop.

He cut the horse open, carefully accessing its freshly empty womb. There wasn't much that he could do, but a rejuvenation, a rebirth could do. Reincarnation. That's what the Avvar believed in, and he had given her the bird for it. He may not practice their religion strictly, but he released a quick prayer to the Lady of the Skies that Sarah's soul may either join her or swiftly be born again. Afterwards, he brought in her body and placed her in the womb, tentative despite the fact that no one was around and that he knew how to conduct the ritual perfectly. He took her life and tried to give it back to her.

He took her life and tried to give it back to her? The logic didn't make any sense.

Will awoke, Jack Crawford hovering behind him, ready for some actual news. "It's a coffin birth," was all Will could give before he temporarily rushed off to keep his sudden vomit from staining his new uniform. It was a loose robe cut with the symbol for the Seekers to essentially show others whom he had to be returned to, and it felt disrespectful to ruin it so soon, but the anxiety of the encounter, the smells, and seeing and feeling the killer had overwhelmed him. When he came back, Jack raised an eyebrow, so he finished explaining. "When a body dies, decomposition builds up all of these gasses within the body and pushes the dead fetus out of its mother's corpse. It's not really a birth-"

"Not to whomever did this," Jack interrupted and Will was slightly irritated at his behavior. It was a very 'him' thing to say, which only made it worse.

"Whoever did this," Will emphasized, "was familiar with the stables. They knew the horse, and knew that she was dying and why. Horses can die of emotions like grief. To the Void with it, most people could from the same given the proper circumstances. He's worked with animals before, even goes so far as to treat them when they're hurt. A healer."

Jack grunted. "How, exactly, is this healing?"

"It's an attempt to wish for her back, or least she would give her a way to come back. He seems to be adopting heavily from Avvar religion, which resides primarily in the Frostback Mountain range and maybe keep them there. Regardless, this was an attempt to let Sarah Craber fly into the afterlife and allow her soul to reborn anew."

They knew what they were looking for now, but ot took them some time to get a lead. They spoke to the stablehands that currently worked for Baron Ingram, and they all seemed reluctant to tell them anything. It was frustrating Jack, who was absolutely sure that someone had to know something. Will was silent for the interrogations, watching how each person looked at them. Jack's instincts were absolutely right; everyone knew someone who followed

their description exactly but were apparently protecting them. Will broke off from the man and stripped himself of any iconography of the Seekers of Truth. It allowed him to dress plainly and might let him appear like one of the servants. Once he was away, he dirtied up the clothes and his face (to hide his recognizable vallaslin) before meeting with anyone. A quick signal to Jack let him know what Will was doing, and he began his own private investigation.

It took a lot longer than he wanted it to, but the other servants didn't seem to connect the figure in Seeker leathers and the markings that denoted them as Dalish with the strange servant walking among them. They didn't pay him any attention either, seeing as they didn't feel threatened by him, so he got to listen to all of their gossip. That included the identity of the person that nobody wanted to speak about in front of him. It didn't take long. Almost as soon as he was out of Jack's earshot, he heard some whispering about the Seekers looking for someone and telling the others not to say anything. The name? Peter. He even managed to get a location.

Later, he returned to Jack with the results of his endeavor and they set off, Will now much cleaner after liberating a basin of its fresh water and now back in his Seeker leathers. Peter was an elf, only a few years older than Will, that used to work in the stables. After he was kicked in the head by a horse, Baron Ingram took pity on him and allowed him to stay on as a kitchen boy. The servants all pitied Peter, but didn't bother to get to know him. Those that had, one by one, were let go. The Baron claimed it was because they were worried about Peter's newfound aggression and felt they had to for their own safety. It smelled like shit to Will, seeing as servants' lives were threatened every day by the very nature of whom they were around, but he didn't express these feelings to Jack.

According to what else he found out, Peter also had a small shack allowed to him by the Baron where he cared for local animals. It allowed him to get a pretty copper, all which went straight back into the running of the small animal clinic. He was only allowed to run it when the kitchen didn't need him, but that was all he spent his free time doing. That was where they found him. The small clinic was exactly that: small. Yet, even with its size, Peter seemed to have managed to stack cages with small animals from floor to ceiling. Jack wasn't very quiet about shutting the door behind him, so the entire space seemed to rattle and a chorus of hisses, squawks, and various other noises immediately responded.

"P-please be careful with the door. You can scare 'em like that." The both looked around a stack to find a mousy looking man. He was lean, weathered, a little wild looking. The big near cat eyes that were characteristic of elves seemed impossibly wide on his small face. This must be Peter.

"Hello," Jack said quietly. "You must be Peter." The elf didn't look at them, but instead put drop clothes on the cages to comfort and quiet the animals. "You.. don't seem curious who we are."

Peter startled and then re-examined them without making eye contact. Will looked to the room around them, watching how each animal responded to his presence. They certainly seemed to like him well enough, which didn't seem to fit with the idea of the murderer that had been painted. That, of course, didn't mean that he didn't do it. "Who are you?" he whispered out, starting and stopping on each word.

Jack nodded. “I’m High Seeker Jack Crawford and this is Seeker Novice Will Lavellan.” Will restrained himself from jumping in surprise. He wasn’t aware that Jack knew his Clan name or that he would be considering him a novice. It wasn’t pertinent right now, so he put a pin in it to address it later. “We’d like to ask you a few questions about someone you worked with while being a stablehand. Her name was Sarah Craber, we found her body recently in some very unusual circumstances.”

“I heard.”

Will frowned. “There was a bird in her chest. Did you hear about that?”

“Is the bird alive?” Peter asked, a little too quickly for Will’s taste. Jack’s too, if the look the man gave Will was any indication.

“Yes.”

There was a flicker of relief on Peter’s face. “Who’s taking care of it?”

Jack didn’t answer it, but instead asked another question. “How well did you know Sarah Craber?” The distress on Peter’s face increased. Jack didn’t say anything further, which was meant to show how he would not capitulate. Will knew the feeling that came with being on the other side of that and briefly pitied Peter, who was clearly not doing well.

“I didn’t know her,” he said through gritted teeth. Jack started to speak, but Peter continued before any words came out, “I know who she is, I just didn’t know her.” He bowed his head and moved back among the animals.

The gesture drew Will’s attention to the large scar on his forehead, presumably where he was kicked by a horse. They followed, slowly and at a decent amount of distance, and Will watched as Peter softly murmured to them. “Are you feeling stressed?” Will asked.

“I-I’m worried about the bird.” Peter glanced at him, clearly uneased by the way that Will was studying him.

“A woman is dead, and you’re worried about the bird,” Jack replied, unhappy with the assessment the response gave him. He was growing more suspicious by the second, but Will wasn’t. Something was ticking by in his brain, pulling and discarding solutions.

Peter’s expression of helplessness certainly helped cement Will’s ideas. “I’m sad for her. I’m sad for the horse. I can’t help them though, but I can help the bird.” He turned away from completely and ventured further into his space. It was strange how such a small one could seem so labyrinthine when trying to navigate it. Jack made to follow, but Will tugged on him so that they could leave.

When they were out, Will told Jack what he knew. “He knows the victim and he knows the animals involved, but I don’t know if he’s the killer. If he is, he never meant to be.”

“And?” Jack inquired, having a strong feeling where it was going.

“If he isn’t, he knows who is.” Regardless of Will’s hunch, they needed to go. They would get nothing by staying any longer.

Shortly after meeting with Peter Bernardone, Will had Jack drop him off at the Lecter estate (a safe distance away so that Hannibal didn’t suspect anything). The man then took the cart and went into Verchiel in disguise so that he could wait on Will and not have anyone report him to the Comte. It was crucial that Hannibal felt like Jack had no part in these meetings. If duplicity was suspected, it would end poorly for everyone involved.

Most of the meeting was spent explaining to Hannibal the situation and all of the parties involved. Comte Lecter nodded at all of the right intervals and looked concerned at all of the appropriate moments, which only served to frustrate Will. There was no doubt that there was at least some honesty in what Hannibal was doing, but how much?

And of course, Hannibal had to push, as he usually did. “You were able to reconstruct his fantasies: one dead creature giving birth to another. The bird served as his victim’s new beating heart.”

“What I found was a hope. The person that did this was attached to Avvar religion after a fashion, and wanted something beautiful for her without understanding it in its fullest. True rebirths can only ever be symbolic.”

Hannibal tilted his head, birdlike in his predatory curiosity. Now that Will could see it for what it was, he wondered how he ever went a session without catching the gleam in the noble’s eyes. “You said ‘true rebirth’. I’m afraid that what little I know of Avvar religion comes from you, and you’ve not been particularly forthcoming.”

Will nodded, it was a fair point. “The Avvar believe that some people are destined to be reborn. When that happens, an animal is found of appropriate value and sacrificed to the gods to show commitment and allow the soul to move on properly. It works in the same fashion that death for the spirits does; when they die, their essence moves to the new body. The problem is that it is only the essence. The personality and memories of the person do not go with them. They are their core and nothing else.”

“Would you say that you’ve been reborn?” Hannibal asked.

Did some part of him die in that prison and only the barest part of him remain? If he was being dramatic, Will would say yes, but that wasn’t quite true. Much as he wished that the experience had transformed him so monstrously that it was a separate person putting a hit on Hannibal and setting the man, that wasn’t true. The memories remained. Who he was remained. What hurt the most about this question was the simple fact that all he could say was no. Instead, he said, “Wasn’t that the goal of your sponsorship?”

Hannibal, of course, avoided the question. “How does it feel to be working with Jack Crawfrod and the Seekers of Truth again? Last time it nearly destroyed you.”

An old tactic and Will recognized it instantly. He was, once again, trying to place blame on Jack Crawford and a wedge between them. It was isolation. Last time, it was probably to keep Will from seeking help and manipulate the amount of interaction he had with others.

Here, he wanted Will to himself. It was painful how obvious it was now that he could reflect on every conversation they shared with a clear head and mind.

“Last time you nearly destroyed me,” Will viciously corrected, and Hannibal only sighed. It was slightly insulting. What Hannibal had tried before wouldn’t work on him, and the other man needed to know it. His hemming and hawing about how unfair Will’s blame was wouldn’t do.

“After everything that happened, Will, you still believe-”

“Stop right there.” Will interrupted, which immediately put Hannibal on guard. They needed to be equal in this. A teacher once told him that a true and good dance required honesty from both of the partners. Dishonesty led to false steps and leads, mixed movements and poor rhythm. Will could know all of the steps by heart, but to properly circle and spin around the other man, he would have to put his very self into it. The benefit gained form this was that he could demand it from Hannibal as well. If the man wanted to avoid a fumble, he had to do the same. “You may have to pretend, but I don’t.”

Hannibal didn’t speak for a moment, and then his lips twitched only slightly. It might have been a smile. “No, you don’t. Not with me.” The truth hidden in the statement burned more than he expected.

Will did concede slightly. “I don’t expect you to admit anything, but I prefer sins of omission to outright lies.” Once upon a time, WIll had made this request and had it cruelly denied. Back when his world seemed to burn right out of his skull, he saw Garrett Hobbs once more and was told that there was no one there. He had begged for this, but not he demanded it. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Will you return the courtesy?” Will nodded. “Why have you returned to me?”

Here was the dishonesty he would have to slip in amongst everything else. He wouldn’t lie, but he could omit. “It’s good to talk things out, but I can’t speak with just anyone about what’s kicking around my head.” And Hannibal had viciously kicked just as much as the horse had hurt Peter.

“Do you fantasize about killing me?”

Bait is needed to lure the prey out into the open. Some hunters liked to pretend it was only ever stalking and tracking, but smart ones knew that knowledge of your quarry and their preferences was just as important. What could excite Hannibal more than Will being near him willingly? “Yes.”

Just as he suspected, Hannibal was enthralled. He leaned forward in his chair to catch every word that came out of Will ’s mouth. “Tell me, how would you do it?”

The elf smirked at the attention being given to him. Hannibal truly didn’t recognize the noose being made. “With my hands.”

The moment was quickly broken, the taut string pulling Hannibal in his direction allowed to go lax. “Then we haven’t moved past apologies and forgiveness.”

“We’ve moved past a lot of things. I discovered a truth about myself when I tried to have you killed.” Will exposed the vulnerability. It was one that he had known going in that he would have to sacrifice, but it was still something he dreaded.

“Doing bad things to bad people made you feel good.”

“Yes.”

He nearly missed the very small hesitation that preceded Hannibal’s question. He had never known Hannibal to truly hesitate about anything. “I need to know if you’re going to try to kill me again, Will.”

With one line, Will could have him a little further into the open. It was a declaration of friendship and understanding, as well as a slight jab. “I don’t want to kill you anymore, your Lordship, not now that I finally find you interesting.”

Hannibal was delighted.

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Abigail sat in the main room of her underground living space. For the last hour or so, she had been hearing voices upstairs that came over this particular place in the house. It hadn’t taken her long to determine that most of the room sat directly under his study. Normally, she wouldn’t have bothered trying to eavesdrop, considering the insulated nature of the space, but the tone and shape of one of the voices was familiar. As soon as she heard it, Abigail knew. It was Will.

Even if it was just muffled warbles, the young woman basked in it. She did still hear it in her dreams, he visited her every few nights without realizing it, but the experience had nothing on hearing it with her own ears. It made everything abruptly real; Hannibal’s plan had worked. Will was free and now he would be joining them. They could get away from it all and be a family. The excitement was tart and sweet, and finally hearing Hannibal come down into her space left her jittery with happiness.

“How long until I need to pack?” she asked as soon as he touched down.

Hannibal paused, taking in her hyper demeanor and general joy, before he gave her the bad news. “It won’t be happening for some time, I’m afraid. Will can’t know about you yet.”

That joy was decimated in only a few seconds. “Why?” she demanded.

“Abigail, Will isn’t ready to accept us. He’s still angry and cares more about justice than family.”

“Only because he doesn’t know that you were just protecting the both of us. If he knows that I’m not dead and that we were waiting on him-”

“Have you forgotten your own part in Will’s incarceration?” Hannibal asked, pulling her up short. “You were the one that helped me with the wounds, that sprayed the blood. When he realizes that, your betrayal will be just as real as mine. He won’t want either of us.”

Abigail didn’t say anything. Her mother had always said that the truth hurt, but she hadn’t expected it to be like this. Yes, she had been feeling guilty about what they had done to Will, but with his freedom she had hoped… something. Maybe that the remorse would all go away and they could be free together. Hannibal forged on, “If we want him to come with us, he has to accept us the way that we are. That may take some time.”

“How much time?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t believe it will take too long.”

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They were out there in the middle of the night, which irked Will on principle. He was finally at a point in his life where he was not experiencing crazy amounts of trouble sleeping, but then his job got in the way. Still, the ability to come and go as well as view these crime scenes and solve the murders where others might be stuck on what was immediately visible helped him. It was encouraging to know that after being confined so long, Will was still able to help the world around him.

The Seekers of Truth had received a message from one of the more remote towns surrounding Verchiel, which brought them to some sort of burial ground. Someone had taken the time to unbury each individual body with a kind of reverence that came from Sarah Craber’s memorial, but not her murder. His mind flashed to the stablehand, Peter Bernardone. Could it be that he uncovered these bodies? The action evoked the imagery of the Avvar conjured up in what happened to Sarah Craber. The bodies may not have been dismembered as Will had seen in some funerals, but they had still been left out in the open. The Augur that he had trained with claimed that doing so allowed the birds to take the person’s spirit to the Lady of the Skies. Unlike what happened with Sarah Craber, no offerings had been left.

“I owe you an apology,” sounded behind him and Will turned, confused. Brian Zeller was looking at him regretfully, which seemed highly out of character for him. Then again, Will hadn’t seen the man properly in months and their relationship hadn't been on the best of terms prior, barely managing this side of amiability.

“Whatever for?” he asked, not sure what kind of thing would have the man lessen his pride and actually apologize to Will.

Brian scoffed. “A variety of things. I didn’t believe you, I didn’t try to help you. I actively told other people that you were horrible and avoided any responsibility on my part by just heaping it further on you. I didn’t even visit you.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Will replied. “The evidence was very compelling. Even I would have a hard time shrugging something that big off.”

Brian shook his head, and Will realized that Jimmy had been trying to approach but was held back by the alchemist's own attempt. "Beverly did. Maybe she didn't buy your innocence, but she allowed enough skepticism to go to bat for your life. I didn't want to hear anything else, so I didn't even try to consider it, but maybe if we had listened…" He cut himself off. There was an awkward silence that sat between the two of Jimmy walking away from whomever he had been previously conversing with, but it gentled when Brian saw Will's concentration switch over.

The ex-Templar decided to explain what Brian meant to Will. "He thinks that if Beverly thought she could talk to us, she would have had one or both of us accompany her to the Bastion and then she wouldn't have been alone. She might not have died."

Jack called to the trio as they sat, contemplating the twists and turns that life takes and how people always seem to go too soon. "We think we found something that can help us understand the killer better," Jack called, which drew their attention. Together, they marched back to Jack.

As it turns out, they found evidence in one of the empty graves that showed it had housed Sarah Craber. They actually had something linking her body to the scene now, definitive proof that this was the same case. The fact that they found something meant that they were able to leave soon after, but the high of the discovery meant that Will's exhaustion gave way to excitement. It left him unable to relax enough to sleep. His restless legs led him to the battlements, where he was able to watch over the Exalted Plains and imagine the blood split in the name of the elven people. The moon cast an eerie glow over the plains, the sparse trees and rock formations creating long shadows in its light.

"Unable to sleep?" asked Jimmy as he sidled up beside him. Will had half-expected Jimmy to come around, but it hadn't been ready for him to come alone. Jack's interruption of their earlier conversation meant that there were things left unsaid. Brian had apparently said his piece, but the ex-Templar had not.

"Of course," Will replied. He spent so much of his time now being dishonest. While it wasn't necessarily lying, it still grated as such. In the quiet moments among people who knew what he stood for, he had decided to practice being as honest as possible with them. That meant Jack, Jimmy, and Brian at the moment.

They both hovered over the drop, arms crossed on the stony bannister separating them from a painful fall to keep the chill away and to stabilize their viewing. "Brian apologized for the both of us earlier, but there was something left out that I felt needed to be said." Will raised an eyebrow, not sure what to say to the man that he rarely had a private conversation with. Of all the members of the squad, Will had interacted with Jimmy the least out of everyone else in the group, not because of animosity but simple lack of engagement on both parts. Jimmy continued, "While I'll admit that I didn't think you were innocent, I did know that you had been suffering and said nothing."

"What do you mean?" Will asked, admittedly a little confused. This was not the direction he thought the topic was going. The elf had made peace with what had happened to him prior to his incarceration and hadn't expected anyone to take the blame for it.

“We all saw it, but I was the one not saying anything. Beverly spoke up, Brian made rude comments, but I didn’t. I wouldn’t call what they did supportive, not until Beverly became your rock later, but we could have done so much better. I may not have been Jack’s second, but I was probably the oldest ‘sibling’ in the little group, and it was my job to watch out for everyone else. I saw the pain that you were in and did nothing.” Will swallowed, speechless. “I was culpable. I may not have thrown the accusations that Brian did, but my silence was just as, if not more, damning. “

“I- um- thank you,” said the younger man. It was strange to hear an apology from anyone, especially when they almost seemed better off. “For what it’s worth, I don’t blame any of you, not anymore. Apology accepted, I guess.” Jimmy looked dubious, so Will kept going, “I mean it, thank you. I’m not used to people taking responsibility like that, even if I don’t lay it squarely at any of your feet.”

“Don’t mention it,” Jimmy replied. “Seriously, don’t. This is already awkward enough.”

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Margot went to see Comte Lecter again. It seemed the prudent thing to do if she wanted to keep his interest in her situation and gain his aid. It also helped that there was something about the man that made him easy to speak with. Whenever they spoke, she always felt like he was actually listening to her and not judging her for any of the words that came out of her mouth. Furthermore, he actually believed her and even encouraged her. A large part of her mind and experience still reminded her that the Game was fickle and his support could easily turn to betrayal, but that didn’t stop her.

Today, he wanted to know about her family and what led her to align herself more specifically against them. Her parents were dead, and she was ready to tear down their legacy and make it hers instead. “My family never saw me as the victim,” she explained. It didn’t matter that Mason had abused her, had done terrible, awful things to herself and others. It didn’t matter that Mason sexually assaulted little boys and herself, or that he wasn’t shy about threatening to do the same again when it suited him. “They saw me as the passive aggressor. Whenever I told them what was happening, they were suitably disgusted by what my brother did, but not with him. It was always with me for allowing it to happen,” she spat.

“Your brother dehumanized you to your family and they fostered that climate of disrespect.”

Margot rolled her eyes. “I’m attracted to women. It didn’t matter that I was fully prepared to do my duty and marry rich or that, between my brother and myself, I’m the more politically savvy one. The mere fact that I had ‘dalliances’ and wasn’t planning to stop seeing women or having intimate relationships with them made them see me as something other. It didn’t matter that most of Orlais has no issue with it. They said that because same sex couples can’t have children, then they shouldn’t be together. Apparently, I was supposed to be a devoted wife and nothing more. They thought I was weird.”

Hannibal’s face did a strange twitch, like he was aborting an expression. It was enough to tell Margot that some of the rumors were true at least, and that he did have relationships with men on occasion. It didn’t bother her, but she knew that feelings of solidarity could do wonders. Instead, his expressions managed to brighten by increments, if that was possible

when you only saw half of the face and the person was exceedingly careful about what expression they were making. “I can promise you, Margot, that I’m much weirder than you will ever be.” Somehow, she didn’t think he was exaggerating. “It’s fine to be weird.”

“Do you know what happened shortly before my father died? They had already forgiven him. Nobody outside of the household knew about his assault, and any servants that were witnesses were quietly disposed of. I was told that he had promised to get better, and because he hadn’t tried anything with me or anyone else since, he had. I was informed that **I** needed to forgive him as well, that holding on to my anger would poison me.” He was studying her. Much as she wished she had the self-control to make this completely an act, it wasn’t. Peeks of her emotions bled through the words until they were saturated, a leak left unplugged. It was strange how easy it was to talk to this man and share your burdens. Hannibal Lecter was so good at controlling himself that you were unable to tell how he actually felt about it, which freed you from tilting a conversation in one direction or another. She continued to let it spill, hoping the flow would coagulate and eventually scab over as long as she didn’t pick at it again. “He may have made bad choices before, but now he can make new, better choices. *Margot, you need to let go or you’re never going to see the good man he’s becoming.* Sometimes I wish Mother hadn’t retired to the chateau by Lake Celestine. Let her see the ‘good man’ Mason had become.”

“Do you think he’ll ever be one?”

“A good man?” Margot snorted. “I believe that my brother won’t stop reveling in his nature. The pain he inflicts is too delicious for him to pass up. Why bother being a good man when he enjoys what he is now?”

Hannibal remained impassive. “How does that make you feel?”

Smiling without joy, she breathed out, “Angry.”

He nodded. “Anger can be an energizing emotion; it prompts action against threat. If you’re angry, instead of despondent, then you know you can stop this from happening again.”

“I know how to stop it,” she growled. The mere fact of the matter is that her current position made her powerless to try and kill him again. There was too much at stake.

“Anyone can become angry. That’s the easy part. To be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way is the hard part. That’s what will allow you to stop your brother.” Margot didn’t know what to say to that. As far as she had been aware, she had that kind of anger. The drive to accomplish her task was all-encompassing, but maybe she had just been unlucky enough for it to be the wrong time.

For the first time, Margot could have sworn that Comte Hannibal Lecter seemed mischievous. “If you really want to kill your brother, Margot, you must wait until you can get away with it.”

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The next time that Will went to visit Peter, he did so alone. Jack was intimidating and could be loud in presentation if not voice. With Peter, that was bound to create more barriers than it would bring down. Will, on the other hand, was quieter. He was an elf, which gave him a small thing in common with Peter, and his overall demeanor came off as gentler. His empathy would also help him tread carefully when required and to push when that was too.

As a peace offering, he brought the bird.

When he placed the bird in its cage in front of the shocked elf, he explained, “You said you were worried about the bird. I thought you might like to see it.”

“I-Isn’t that evidence?” Peter questioned, looking equal parts relieved and wary at the gift.

“I promise you, they don’t need it anymore. Even if they said something, it wouldn’t matter though. I’m not a real Seeker.”

“You’re not?” Peter said, looking away as he picked up the cage and placed it somewhere else so that he could easily watch it but it wouldn’t have to be held. It was taken with such care, which only made Will fond of him. It occurred to him that Peter was potentially a murderer and that feeling fond was a bad thing, but that didn’t seem like a possibility at the moment.

He smiled, genuinely for the first time in what felt like forever. “Not really. Mages can’t be Seekers of Truth, but the High Seeker would like to bend a few rules to allow me to be. For now, I wear some armor with its symbols, help them out with investigations, and live with them in the Bastion d’Argent.”

Peter shrugged. “Sounds like you’re a Seeker then.”

“I don’t have the powers or the authority.”

“And?” Peter came back. He couldn’t come up with an argument he hadn’t made already, so he moved onto something else.

Will hesitated. There wasn’t an easy way to convince Peter of the trouble he could be in, or a way to broach the topic without making it into an ambush. Instead of overthinking it, he just came out and said it. Best to rip off the bandage before it got stuck in the wounds. “I’m worried Peter. The High Seeker thinks you might be the murderer, and he’s going to come back and arrest you.” Not necessarily true. Jack was waiting for Will to come back with something. “He’ll impound your animals and it will break your heart.”

Peter’s voice was strong, even as his eyes watered. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

He soothed, “I know you didn’t, but that’s not always relevant. What did you do, Peter? They found Sarah, but how did you find her?”

Peter carefully put the starling between them, staring at the bird instead of directly engaging with Will. He knew the tactic well; it was a way to avoid being overwhelmed by stimuli and protect yourself from the threat that was the world. “It’s strange. You can develop an

individual language with an animal that only you can understand. It tells you, without words, what it needs, what it wants. No one else knows, not even other animals." He chuckled. "This one's already speaking to me."

"This one's spoken to you before." He looked away, allowing Peter his private moment of intimacy and grief without his gaze. "Did you know that the Avvar believe that birds carry the souls of the dead to the Lady of the Skies, where she can watch over them? They also believe that some souls are destined to be reborn and to do great things with their new life."

"You think-" Peter's voice broke. "You think that I think this bird is Sarah? She's gone. She's everywhere and nowhere."

Will moved closer without looking at Peter, careful to disrupt as little of the space as he could. "Tell me who killed her."

The air beside Will stopped moving with the comforting gestures that Peter had been giving the starling. The air was silent instead, and very very still. "After something so ugly, I just wanted something beautiful for her." Peter's voice betrayed him; he was crying.

Will returned his gaze, softened with the hope of offering comfort. 'I see you,' he wanted it to say. 'I'm not judging you.' It wasn't much, but it was what he could give without touching Peter, which he probably didn't want. "You were grieving her. You couldn't save her, but you hoped you could honor her and bring poetry to her death."

Peter shook his head and then nodded in quick succession. "I knew that it would catch your attention. I wanted you to find me. If you could find me, then you could find him, too."

Will's stomach dropped out. He whispered, "Do you have a shadow, Peter? Someone only you can see." Peter nodded, tears streaming through the dirt on his cheeks, and Will felt his eyes wet in turn. "He's someone you considered a friend. He made you feel like you weren't alone. Until you saw what he really is, and it made you even lonelier."

Peter sniffled, and, when he spoke, his voice was still thick with desperation and grief. "No one will believe me. He has so much power, and he'll use it to make sure that no one will believe me."

Determination filling him, Will promised, "I'll make sure that they do."

It took them a whole day. Will watched from behind the newly repaired glass as Miriam Lass pulled out the parchment in front of her and made a couple of notes before the interrogation proceeded as planned. The human across from her, a male probably in his late thirties and unbearably neat, was smiling, but his eyes were dead. For this meeting, they managed to get him to take off the mask, though he had claimed every kind of excuse and accusation before they managed to get him to agree. Baron Clark Ingram was from an old Orlesian noble family that had moved to Ferelden during Orlesian occupation and had prospered there, before being forced back. Despite being a minor noble from a formerly disgraced house, everything about him screamed privilege and superiority so badly that it gave Will headache just looking at him.

Miriam Lass was the one conducting the interview, because the murders made it seem like he had a problem with women. Will didn't quite understand why they would stick a woman in the room with the man if he had problems as such, but Jack was pretty clear with his explanation. Part of what the Seekers of Truth had to do was push buttons. Everyone had small ones that they didn't think about, and having her in there with Baron Ingram gave them a chance to watch his reactions, especially in such a high pressure situation. Jack also made it clear that he had been reluctant to do this since MIriam was still recovering, but she had mentioned it herself and then insisted on being the one to do it. Privately, Will thought that she was probably trying to push herself and was maybe doing too much too soon, but that's a hard thing to convince someone of. He didn't listen when people told him the same thing, why shouldn't someone else do the same?

"I was only trying to help him. You all know about the difficulties of sponsoring troubled individuals," Ingram said with a not-so-subtle look at the mirror in the room. "The alternative was leaving him to the wayside."

"And yet, looking at your notes here," -Miriam gestured to a journal that she placed on the table- "You claimed that he was aggressive and beyond saving. We questioned many of the staff at your estate, and they claimed that Messere Bernardone was quiet and contemplative. His parents were in utter disbelief at the accusations."

Ingram rolled his eyes. "This may come as a surprise, but servants don't particularly like nobles. There's always some reason for their hatred, sometimes justified sometimes not. They are also notorious gossips, and what parents want to believe that their son is capable of this kind of monstrosity?"

Miriam, stone-faced and barely concealing anger, replied, "We also have access to enough research that says a person with something that encompassing affecting their brain is more vulnerable to manipulation." Will winced. A lot of that was probably him, especially considering all of the interviews Frederick gave and those that Jimmy and Brian put him through retroactively. Ingram shrugged. "I'm surprised. You don't feel very sorry for him, much as you claim that your altruism stemmed from pity."

"He's accused me of murdering sixteen women," Ingram spat. The young woman across from him carefully didn't react.

"How does that make you feel?"

"Inconvenienced. I'm being detained on the word of someone worthy of less respect who is also clearly damaged. I've tried to help him, and he throws my aid back in my face."

Miriam assured him, "You're not being detained, you're being interviewed. We are called the Seekers of Truth; we're just being thorough." She smiled and made a note. Will saw his face fall and glare at the scribe table holding the parchment. Miriam's back was toward them, so the writing was visible to those watching the proceedings. It said: 'next move?'

"What are you writing down?" their guest groused, smile carefully back in place. It couldn't have appeared more wooden.

“A simple observation,” Miriam coolly remarked.

“About me?” he demanded. Miriam only smiled. Will admired her for her resolute amusement; he could see the strain beginning to settle in around her eyes. Gently, she reached forward to touch his hand, a pretend attempt at comfort. Ingram pulled back immediately, refusing the contact.

“Smart. Miriam is pushing him on his feelings, gauging a reaction and observing how comfortable he is with emotion. He could bear her touch.” Jack glanced at him and nodded.

“A few of the worst kinds of people that we bring in behave this way as well, but he could just be resentful.”

“He’s a predator,” Will growled out.

“He’s also a noble. They’re all predators as far as I’m concerned. The problem is that we have no evidence to keep him, and, without that, the Orlesian court will go into an uproar and start on their bullshit about Chantry power all over again.”

“Did you know Sarah Craber?” Miriam asked, and they both turned their attention back to the interview.

Ingram shook his head. “No, but Peter talked about her extensively when I checked in with him. It occurred often enough that I might say that he was obsessed with her.”

“And you believe he’s capable of murder?” Miriam asked. “We’re not so sure.”

Clark Ingram leaned forward into Miriam’s space, and Will watched as her entire body went rigid. As he spoke, she worked to relax each individual muscle so that he wouldn’t sense her ‘weakness’. “There is absolutely no evidence that I did this. It’s a statement of fact for him, not of innocence. If you want to know how I feel, the truth of it, I feel like I don’t want to be here anymore. The Chantry has no authority over me, and you’ve already stated that I’m not being detained. I’d like to be on my way.”

Jack sighed and rapped against the glass. Ingram startled, and Miriam deflated as the code for the order struck sound in the room. “Jack, you’re making a mistake.”

“He’s right. We have no reason to keep him here.”

“Peter Bernardone is psychologically disadvantaged. He’s been manipulated and abused. This man was in a position of trust and he betrayed it.”

They both looked at Miriam as she held the door open for the despicable man and stared at the glass as he exited. “I know Will, but we can’t do anything about it right now.”

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After Clark Ingram left, Jack escorted Will back to his quarters. Will had scowled and complained that he wasn’t a child, but Jack shoved him in and told him that they would need to speak later. Beyond the door, Brian and Jimmy were waiting. They had told Jack that they

wanted to speak with Will on their own and check in on him. Once Jack had informed him of the plan, they were adamant about keeping in touch, worried about what he might do to himself should he be left to his own devices. He had already allowed himself to be pushed too far before.

Consciously, Jack hadn't been sure how to take that, but the immense and immediate guilt that surged inside before he could shove it down said that his subconscious knew exactly what the statement meant. To stave it off, he went to his foremost concern at the moment: Miriam Lass.

Yes, Miriam had insisted on being the one to talk with Ingram, but Jack noticed how on edge she seemed during the whole interview, much as she was accomplished at hiding it, and knew that the whole affair had her shaken. Perhaps he should have insisted that she didn't speak with Ingram? Miriam may have been trying to use the noble to confront her own feelings about the Highwayman, seeing as she didn't succeed in killing Frederick Chilton, and then had to be told that they suspected he wasn't the man that was the Highwayman. Jack pointedly didn't tell her who they thought the Highwayman was, only promised her that they were keeping tabs on him. She hadn't been happy, but Miriam was still in recovery. She didn't need to try and take on a murderer, let alone one that held her captive for years. Jack could easily understand why she would want closure, but this wasn't the way to do it.

Jack found her on the ramparts, overlooking the empty plain that surrounded the Bastion. It was starting to hit late afternoon, and the sweltering heat of summer had yet to die away, autumn though it was. Bugs buzzed around them, and he swatted at an errant few while he approached. "Miriam?"

The young Seeker glanced back at him with a weak smile. "Hey Jack."

The older Seeker settled in beside the young woman that he thought could be his apprentice. It would have continued his "line" of training. Beverly Katz would have taken over for him, and then Miriam Lass for her, and so on. Now, Beverly was dead, and the man that had killed her had released a traumatized Miriam back into the world. "How are you?" he asked, and she snorted. "I know it's a stupid question, but I thought it important to ask."

Turning towards him and putting her back to the wall, she shrugged. "Not well, I guess. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed with all that's happened. After being isolated so long, I've just wanted to be outside."

"I noticed," he replied with a smirk. Miriam had taken to camping out in the courtyard. It wasn't actually that funny when you thought about why she might want to stay outside as opposed to indoor spaces, but if he kept it in good humor, it might make her less self-conscious about it. She still looked embarrassed, though.

"Sorry."

"Don't be."

Her smile grew a little stronger, but not much, before falling away completely. "I want to tell you something… please don't be upset."

That was concerning, but Jack wasn't going to shut her away. If she felt this strongly about it, it was worth hearing. "I won't be."

"I- I think I might need to leave."

"I can go away if you want to be alone."

"No!" Miriam interrupted. Sheepishly, she repeated, "No. Sorry, that's not what I meant. I think I need to leave the Seekers. You all know who the Highwayman is, even if he isn't in custody, and I know that you're watching him closely. I want to see this through so badly, but I think stepping away might be better for me." It was an admission, and clearly a difficult one. Jack wasn't happy with her decision on the matter; he wanted her to be the best that he knew she could one day be.

Unfortunately, he also knew that day was not coming right now, especially not with Hannibal Lecter still roaming free. Every day that she stayed at the Bastion was a reminder of what she had been and what she had originally set out to do. Over two years. Jack had a hard time imagining dealing with capture for that amount of time and not completely breaking down. "I understand," he replied, keeping all emotions that might hint otherwise out of his voice. If this was what she needed, it was what she needed. "For how long?"

"I don't know." She looked back out to the world, taking in the view that had been denied to her.

Jack felt that familiar sense of remorse again. He hadn't let her in on the plan much more than just that they had one. It was too much of a worry, but seeing the effect of Miriam's attempt at finding the Highwayman out in the open left a strange hollow feeling in his chest. He had used her, and he was using Will. Every time the young elf spoke with Hannibal, he was putting himself at risk… for Jack. For Jack, Will was playing the bait.

Oh. That's what Jimmy meant.

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Jack had shoved Will at Jimmy and Brian, both of whom ambushed him with worry and questions. He could tell that they were trying to make up for perceived wrongdoings (and it felt nice to have people regret the way they treated him so much), but he didn't need their help. He was perfectly capable of handling himself, he had been doing it for a while now, and their protectiveness, while the intention was nice, was unneeded.

"Will. Just what are you planning to do?" Jimmy asked, eyes piercing his skull. "It's not exactly like he's going to show you everything and go 'ta da' like a performer. The man lasted this long by being cautious."

"I don't know," Brain said. "We can tell that Hannibal's got a thing for him. Maybe he would show him the ropes." Both men stared at Brian for a long time. "What? We all know it."

Jimmy waved his hand in Brian's face. "Ignore him. Look, you can't skid by on something like that. We're worried. We've already lost Beverly, we don't want to lose you too."

Commenting on how they were happy to lose him before was on the tip of his tongue, but Will took a long look at both of their faces and knew it was unworthy of him. They hadn't gone to see him, yes, but he didn't know their minds and hearts without knowing they were there. Prior to his imprisonment, the little he saw of them involved them being angry with him, and everyone was angry with him back then. Even his largest supporters now weren't on his side. In the months since, Will didn't actually know what they were going through or how they felt. Furthermore, his earlier forgiveness should not be rescinded now that he was frustrated with them. A few nights ago, he hadn't been angry; it was only brewing now because of his irritation with the situation. They had already apologized, and they were trying to not make the same mistakes again.

"I'll be careful," Will relented. "We're planning to go see Peter tonight. I have a feeling that Baron Ingram is going to retaliate after being brought in, and I want to make sure that he is okay." The elf didn't say that he was worried what Peter would do as well. If he was in a position to kill Hannibal a month or so ago, he wouldn't have known what he would do either. He had tried to kill Hannibal, but if the man had been right in front of him without the barrier of hours worth of travel apart… He didn't know.

Jimmy placed a hand on his shoulder. "We trust you Will. I'm sure you'll do the right thing, but I want to make sure that you also try and preserve your own life as well." Will nodded, although he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep that promise.

It felt bizarre. Here he was on the way to stop a murder and save a man's soul with the Highwayman himself. It was a sharp disconnect between the man that Will was to be and the one he was pretending to be. He genuinely wanted to help Peter, and he genuinely was wrathful enough with Clark Ingram that the temptation to exact revenge was there. This wasn't the way they should go about it.

Naturally, Hannibal would notice his anguish. "You look like a man who has suffered an irrevocable loss." Will didn't feel like reminding Hannibal that he had already suffered several, all at the hands of the noble. As they traveled on horseback along the dusty trail, a large part of Will was screaming to dump the man on the side of the road, but that wasn't justice or righteous. It would only end with another person dead. In a similar vein, Will needed to get to Peter Bernardone before something happened that could never be undone. Peter had stayed clean throughout his tenure under Ingram, and he was going to stay that way. "I am trying to prevent one."

"Do you think if you save Peter Bernardone, you can save yourself?"

Will slowed his horse specifically to glare at the noble. "Save myself from whom, your Lordship?" he spat, hoping to see the man flinch, even slightly. He didn't.

"From who you perceive me to be," Hannibal replied with an unnaturally cheery tone. It was already barely tolerable to be in the man's presence, Will didn't appreciate the Highwayman for trying to give him more difficulties.

And if Will was being honest (which is what Hannibal asked him to be), there was something else that was far more dangerous and far more frightening. “I’m afraid I need to be saved from whom you perceive me to be instead.”

“Every time you think about it, it stings, doesn’t it?” Hannibal asked and he sounded so unbelievably smug. It made Will’s teeth ache as he clenched his jaw tightly. “You wonder if I could be right about you. Many troublesome behaviors strike when we are uncertain of ourselves, as you have been for much of your life. You feel so strongly for Peter, because he lies in the same darkness that holds you.”

The darkness that held Will was a unique blend of murderers and demons that scrambled up his brain so much that he had trouble walking through the landscape of it. All of the landmarks had been torn down and replaced by unfamiliar icons. “I’m alone in that darkness.” And it was dangerous to go alone.

“You’re not alone, Will. I’m standing right beside you.” That was a fucking relief. “Do you feel closer to Peter? Does he fantasize about death the same way that you do?”

Will was not in the mood for this kind of conversation, not when he had a clear and defined goal in mind with a timeline. He spurred his horse onward in lieu of an answer and hoped against hope that the noble would leave him be after this. It was unlikely, but he was still allowed to wish.

The first place he went to was Peter’s animal clinic. That was where the elf was most likely to be; last time Will was there, he noticed that there was a small living space in the back corner. Whether that was to be closer to the animals or further away from Ingram, Will no longer knew. It could be either or both. Upon arrival, the first thing he noticed was that the door was wide upon, and there were no lights on in the building. Will’s eyes adjusted to the dark rapidly and he rushed in, noticing that Hannibal had to stop to light a torch before following. Human eyes were so strange.

The inside was ransacked. Cages were pushed to the ground and scattered, no longer in their neat little stacks. Even more worrying, they were all wide open. It was like a grenade had gone off, spraying the wreckage of a man’s life and passion into devastation. Bits of wood and rust. As soon as he finished taking it all in, Will burst out of the clinic and into the night, heading straight for the stable. He didn’t even bother getting on his horse, that would take precious time away from his pace. Hannibal was moving behind him, getting the horses ready as fast as he could and taking the abandoned one with him so they would have them later. Will was too busy climbing and picking his way through the clutter of the land to bother.

The stable was soon in sight, the clack of hooves behind him. “Peter!” Will yelled, smacking his body into the doors to force them open faster. “Peter!” he cried as his weight finally caused them to give way and he tripped into the room without something to hold his balance.

The main area of the stable was quiet. The animals in their pens were holding vigil, still as the ancient graves of elves that littered secret parts of the forest. The silence was unnatural in its strange reverence, all of noise and movement gathered in one point of the room. Peter was rhythmically humming while sewing a horse up. Knowing exactly what Peter had done the last time he had done this, knowing exactly who had to have let his animals go into the wild

without protection and who had been tormenting Peter, Will asked, “Peter. Is Baron Ingram in that horse?”

Peter nodded. Behind him, footsteps approached. Hannibal was at his left shoulder, surveying the scene. “We are hardwired to see people everywhere,” Peter said. “Every animal. Every life. We’re all people.”

“Even the Maker is personified. We call an all-powerful being Him,” rumbled Hannibal. It was disconcerting, hearing him so close behind Will while he was focused on the life before him.

Peter continued with his sewing, not stopping. It seemed like it might be meditative. It was possible that he no longer realized that he was doing it. Each stitch was exactly like the last, and Will had to stop himself from going to the man and stopping him. The process had finished, there was no halting it now. He had failed. Peter looked up at Will, not in his eyes and Will didn’t expect him to. “He-he couldn’t see that. He forfeited his humanity, so I forfeited mine. I used to have a horrible fear of ever hurting anything, but he helped me get over that.” The other elf shook his head, so much confusion and resignation in his expression. “This all feels so strange. I feel so abnormal now.”

“An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.” Strangely, Hannibal’s words seemed to calm Peter. He was being pulled out of the place he had retreated to, a place that Will knew well from personal experience. Will had gritted his teeth, irritated at Hannibal for his encouragement of Peter to kill someone, but for all that the man was evil, he was helping.

Peter was crying now, but his grief was better than the nothing from before. “I think he deserves to die.”

Finally, Will felt it was safe to approach. Or maybe, he simply no longer cared. Peter needed comfort and Will was going to give it to him. “You didn’t deserve to kill him, Peter.” He placed his hands softly on the other elf’s shoulders, gently tugging him upward into a standing position. “I want you to come with me.”

Peter nodded and stood with him. Will led him away from the wreckage, watching as he picked his way through the night. They left, going back to the clinic. The run to the stable had felt like it was hours, but the walk back was only two minutes-maybe three. Their arrival was not heralded by the cacophony of animals that had greeted Will and Jack the first time, nor Will the second time. Instead, there was only the quiet that came with the night. Going inside, Will watched as Peter slowly began picking up the pieces of his life, ruined by Baron Clark Ingram. He placed the blame solely in the hands of that monster.

Peter shattered the quiet. “Cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds’ nests. They trick them into raising their chicks, but a robin knows when it’s being used.”

“Did you know?” Will asked.

Taking a deep breath, Peter replied, “I didn’t want to know.” He pulled up a broken crate. It held food for the animals, but now its contents were covering the floor. It would be

impossible to pick up every kernel by hand. Odds were, the elf would allow his animals to do the cleaning for him, if Jack didn't haul him off or execute him first. Peter didn't exactly have magic or a High Seeker trying to find an alternative to Tranquility to protect him. He paused in his cleaning. "If a robin removes a cowbird's egg from its nest, the cowbird will destroy that nest, eggs and all."

Interesting. "Out of spite?"

Shaking his head, Peter explained, "It's not spite. Spite belongs to people. We just don't understand why the cowbirds do it."

"I can tell you that what was done to you was done purely for cruelty's sake," Will said. He didn't want Peter to get any ideas about what Ingram was capable of or for him to assume that the man had an actual reason.

Slowly, Peter began fixing the empty cages, leaving them open as if they would be waiting for the animals that once loved the world inside of them. "I know that some of them will survive on their own, but they were mostly rescued or injured animals. Some of them won't. I hope that some of them will come home, but-" he turned to Will. "I won't be here when they do, will I?"

Will thought to Jack, probably getting ready to storm the stables and arrest Peter for murder. He knew that Jack would try and listen to reason, but someone would demand that Ingram's murderer be executed and the nobles always thought that the Chantry was overreaching their power. The whole situation seemed to only become more tense when some of the scandal around his employment became clear. "No," he told Peter, but wished it wasn't true. "You won't."

Peter, eyes still wet, finally looked fully at Will. They locked gazes for a single moment in time, before they couldn't handle it and turned away from each other. "I think I hate him."

I can help you hate him . "I envy your hate. It makes it much easier when you know how to feel."

"Makes what easier?" Peter asked, and Will wished that he wasn't so naive, even now. It was too painful.

"Killing them."

Peter looked, confused. Really confused, like he didn't know what to feel about Will's declaration. "I didn't kill him. I wanted him to wake up in death and choke on it. To punish him, like he hurt so many others."

Will's body completely tensed, coiled to spring. If Baron Clark Ingram wasn't dead, then it wasn't too late. Peter was still himself, and the Baron was waiting in the stable, probably crawling out from his horse. It would only take a minute or so to end it and end whatever torment the man had cooked up for Peter without his new friend having to sully himself in the process.

Will quickly gave an excuse and dashed back to the stable. His body was running high on adrenaline and the heady anticipation of getting justice for Peter, whose life was ruined by this noble. Nobody. Nobody was going to believe Peter, whether or not this man was alive. He was a noble, his word held so much more weight in the government and in the court, even if people knew that he was lying. It was part of the Game and the hierarchy. If he wanted Peter to be free, Will would have to do it himself.

Thick ooze covered the floor of the stable, trailing from the gaping would in the horse's side. Vaguely, Will heard Hannibal say to a blood and gore soaked man to get back in the horse, but his blood and heart were pumping through his ears. He didn't care what **Clark Ingram** or **Hannibal Lecter** had to say. He wanted vengeance and justice, for Peter and for himself. Steadily, he raised his hand, having not been allowed access to his crossbow or any of his private belongings that had also been weapons yet. It didn't matter, Will still had his magic and the look on Igram's face when he started to bring up a bolt of energy was priceless.

Ingram held a hammer in one hand, but it dropped out of weak fingers. He held his arms out beside him, and smiled. It was evil and patronizing. Will didn't have time for a monster's games. "Seeker, I'm the victim here."

Will smiled with too many teeth and watched as Ingram's face died. "I'm not a Seeker. I'm a friend of Peter's." The man fell to his knees, no longer trying to garner sympathy. It was good; for once, Will didn't have any empathy to spare.

"Peter's- Peter's confused."

Will hesitated, just for a moment. Ingram seems to take this as agreement and started to get up, before Will fully summoned his Arcane Bolt. The energy, pure and unavoidable at this distance, swirled around his arm in a mesmerizing dance. Hannibal was at his right shoulder, one hand placed on the shoulder that was not attached to his blazing arm. Will smirked, one eye twitching at the anger flooding him. "I'm not. Pick up the hammer." He would not do this against an unarmed man. If he was going to kill Ingram, it would be with the man acknowledging his role and what his intention with that hammer had been in totality.

"Will," Hannibal tried to interrupt, his arm clutching Will's shoulder. The pressure was painful, but easily ignored in the face of justice, for himself and for Peter.

Will got closer and growled in Ingram's face, feeling the hand trying to pull him back. "Pick. It. Up." The noble kneeling on the ground did not comply. Slowly, Ingram's pleading faltered in its entirety. His face deadened, and that was good enough for Will. The monster's mask was no longer in place, his complete lack of ability to feel anything was back.

Hannibal's weight leaned onto his shoulder, his voice whispering in WIll's ear, "It won't feel the same, Will. It won't feel like killing me."

Will scoffed and said aloud, "It doesn't have to. I remember Hobbs, I know what it will feel like. It'll feel good to rid the world of this parasite."

"You did the best anyone could do for Peter, but don't do this for him," Hannibal begged, and it was begging wasn't it. Will had never pictured the day that Hannibal Lecter would be

begging for someone's life. "Do not do this for Baron Ingram's victims or their many friends and relatives who would love to see him dead." Ingram's face did not move and that only rankled more. "If you're going to do this, Will, you must do this for yourself."

"Please don't," Ingram said, but the effect was lost thanks to his dead eyes and neutral delivery.

Though Will couldn't see it, Hannibal gave Ingram a stern glare. "You would be wise to remain silent, Ingram." The man seemed to take affront to both the lack of title and the lack of respect given, but followed Hannibal's direction nonetheless. The Comte addressed WIll again, "This is not the reckoning you promised yourself."

One second passed. Then two. Then three. Will's slow breathing punctuated the silence. One moment, there was nothing, and then Will released the energy. It was one single, solitary moment in time, a split second between his releasing of magical energy, an arcane bolt that was never supposed to miss, and his lack of ability to gauge where Hannibal was due to his rage. Hannibal's left hand shot out and moved Will's arm only an inch to the side, causing the bolt to graze the man, but ultimately scorch the wall behind him. They all froze, before Hannibal turned Will around to face him, a soft expression of fondness on his face. He pulled Will's face ever slowly close to his. "No matter my knowledge of people, I could never entirely predict you. I may water the garden and watch it grow, speak to the plants of all I wish to see, but do not know what kind of fruit my labor brings. You are a caterpillar, transforming in its chrysalis, but when you hatch, you will inevitably follow your own nature and remain beyond me."

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Hannibal had been gone for a good portion of the evening, which wasn't strange. What was odd was the fact that upon his return, he immediately came down to her. Usually there was some talk with the servants and a check up on the overall household. He might even visit his head servant and ask about any visitors or messengers while he was gone. Instead, Abigail heard him walk through the house and straight to her.

"Hannibal?" she inquired as he touched down on the floor proper. "This is unusual."

When he turned to look at her directly, there was a smile gracing his face. He had saved genuine ones for her before, but they had become increasingly rarer the longer they spent together, and none of them had ever appeared quite like this. "My apologies if you were busy, dear Abigail, but I knew that I needed to see you straight away."

"What is it?"

"Will might be able to join us sooner rather than later. Something happened tonight, something marvelous."

She gasped. "He might? When will we go? Where?"

He pulled her into a gentle hug and patted her hair. "Do not worry. I've made a place for all of us, I promise. There's just a few things we need to take care of first." Hannibal pulled back

and moved his hands to cup her face. “I have a surprise for you. It should help you acclimate to your new life.”

“What kind of surprise?” She was genuinely curious. He hadn’t given her any surprises in a long time.

Hannibal placed a bag that he had brought, one Abigail hadn’t noticed in her haste to greet him, and pulled out a small bone knife and a bleached white mask. It was fashioned in the same way as his, simple designs with something like antlers curling back and around her head. He held it up to her noise and she sniffed; it was made of bone. She raised an eyebrow, but he took her hand. “Come. There’s someone you need to see again and say goodbye to. I think this is the only way you can fully put your old life behind you and accept Will and I as your family.” She took his hand, and he brought her up the stairs.

Abigail had no way of knowing that her father’s corpse, which had been retrieved from the Seekers when they finally sought to dispose of it, would be there, nor that Hannibal would have her slit his throat in the manner he had her. The feeling that destroying him gave her was the sweetest gift that Hannibal could give her; showing her how her father loved was the second most. It was strange to accept that she, Hannibal, and Will could never be like other people. They didn’t feel like everyone else, and they didn’t show love like them either.

One it was done and they gave Garrett Hobbs, her former father, a proper Andrastian funeral, Abigail was finally free. He was gone, and she knew that all nightmares of him would be gone forever. The sleep she got that night was dreamless, and, for the first time, she longed for Will and Hannibal to be with her there instead.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I need to say this, but Will's feelings are extremely valid in this chapter. He's got a right to be angry with people, and I feel like his inner dialogue is him trying to talk himself down. Just because you've accepted someone's apology doesn't mean any negative feelings towards previous interactions are invalid. Let yourself feel and recognize it for what it is. I don't personally believe that means you have a right to take it out on them, but don't think that you're 'wrong' for being angry at someone for something they've apologized for. Work it out in your own time.

SPOILERS FOR DRAGON AGE

For those of you that like to nitpick, I am very aware that Will can't actually become a Seeker due to what the Vigil entails because he is a mage, but do keep in mind that only the Lord/Lady Seeker actually knows about how Seekers get their abilities. So yes, Jack thinks that he can make Will a Seeker. It's a good thing Will is saying no for now.

Enfenim banal'ras

Chapter Summary

> "Men's hearts hold shadows darker than any tainted creature." - Flemeth, Dragon Age Origins

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> For those of you paying attention to the summaries, yes, I really like Flemeth. I think she's fascinating. A lot more of these summaries (I pick a lot of them out in advance) are quotes from her.
>
> Once again, sorry about it being so overdue. It's been done forever, but my struggle with Chapter 10 has prevented me from editing. Seriously, I've been working on 10 for over a month and it's finally done. I'm hoping to edit and put it up by tomorrow, but we'll see.
>
> Enfenim banal'ras: To fear a shadow, Shadow of Fear

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Abigail was still covered in the coagulated mess that had been her father's blood. It had been so long that there had been more puss and ooze than anything else, the debris of maggots eating away at her father's flesh. With the copy killer taken care of, they saw no reason to keep the corpse, but until that moment, they had been keeping it with a preservation glyph. It had decayed just enough since that time for her father's body to be clearly a corpse, but it was still definitely him. The glassy eyes had bored into her with such love that it was sickening.

She was glad to be free of him.

Still in the destroyed dress, she dragged the body to where Hannibal bid. It appeared that while she was communing with Hannibal and her dead father, the servants had been instructed to build a funeral pyre and then leave them in peace. Sneakily, Abigail glanced up to where Hannibal had told her Bella and Jack Crawford were sleeping. The curtain was dark and they had moved far away enough that the smoke wouldn't perturb the pair. Hannibal wanted to make sure that the grounds held no trace of the event come morning. During their discussion of her killing her father like he would have killed her, he had told her what happened with Will that night. Her elven father was staying in the village proper, away from the estate. She wished that she could see him, but their separation was for the best.

Hannibal was right. He wasn't ready to see her yet, but, one day, he would be. Hopefully that day would come sooner rather than later. She longed to show him what she knew and what she was capable of now. They could share dreams without her having to pretend. Maybe… maybe she would manifest magic and they could share that too.

They put the husk of Garrett Hobbs on the pyre, and Hannibal let her light it herself. It was satisfying and relieving, watching him burn and be given to the Maker. Fire was purifying, and she was purging herself of the terrible influence he had had on her life. Will had once told her that people did controlled burns on forests sometimes, because it rid it of the detritus that prevented growth. While it hurt initially, the woods after would grow even more beautifully. Some seeds even required fire to grow properly; heat was required to allow the seeds to germinate. Maybe that was what she was? A seed burned of its shell, pushing past the barrier into the world. Now, without the shadow of her father keeping her from the sun, she could grow beautifully.

"You did well, Abigail," Hannibal said, patting her on the shoulder. The surge of warmth she received from the affection was wonderful. Abigail turned towards him and grasped for a hug, which he granted. "I'm so proud of you."

Behind her, the fire died.

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The world was devoid of color, only existing in hues; black and white standing against one another. Will glared across at the figure tied to one of the trees, the leaves that were supposed to be full of reds, golds, and oranges, now varying shades of grey. Some of them were warmer and cooler, but the subtle tints granted only amplified the artificiality of his world. It was a dream. Across from him was a demon.

Hannibal Lecter was tied to a tree. It was a position of weakness that Will had always wanted him in. The man would not be cowed or controlled, but he could be vulnerable. He would not be able to direct Hannibal, but he was able to direct his circumstances. The rope was loose only enough to be tightened, the end of it held in the teeth of a halla, wreathed in the feathers of a raven. It was a partnership he knew well; to saddle a halla was disrespectful. They were partners, and never had Will understood that more than in this moment. He could not reign it in, but he could work with it.

"What do you want to hear, Will?" Hannibal asked, looking more pleased than Will had ever actually seen the man. "Which answer do you want to hear?"

"What's happening now and about to happen is the answer," Will growled, clenching his fists. The tension of the moment thrummed in his body, beating with his heart and moving with his blood. "Admit it. Admit to me what you are." A voice saying it could help make him hate. Would hearing it make him hate Hannibal any more? Would he be satisfied that he could not feel guilt then?

Hannibal grinned. "Must I denounce myself as a monster, while you still refuse to see the one growing inside of you? Will that make you happy?"

He didn't answer. Instead, Will whistled and the halla replied. It moved forward, one step through the muddy dirt of this grey world at a time. The rope went taut, but the monster he had remained as docile. Will might have seen the glimpse of antlers curling around and behind his head, but it was too fast. He wasn't sure if it was something he actually saw or something he wanted to.

"Why not appeal to my better nature?"

His reply was quick: "I wasn't aware you had one."

"I see you, Will." It had to be a demon. "I am aware of you, fully. No one can be fully aware of someone unless we love them. That full spectacle doesn't belong to those that don't." There was no way that anyone else could say the words he wanted and dreaded without peering into his mind. "By that love, we see the potential in our beloved and long to see them reach it." It made it so much harder to know how to feel. "Through that love, we aid our beloved in seeing their potential in turn. When we express it, our beloved's potential comes true. We guide them to their truest self, because they do not see what they can do."

Will whistled again, tired. He had heard enough and didn't want to hear more. It makes it so much harder to know how to feel. So much harder. The conflict was ripe, but it wasn't with Hannibal. It was with the deepest part of himself that realized every peek he gave the man revealed another truth to him. Hannibal never judged him. The anger he felt no longer felt as righteous as it did directly after Beverly's death. It was more betrayed than anything. The only people who can betray you are those closest to you. The halla moved, but each step was halting. He willed it to keep going, so it did as he bade. "I once promised you a reckoning," he growled, trying to force the anger, the betrayal to the surface. It came, and the steps grew stronger. Will would not allow himself to be so taken and blinded again. He watched as the rope pushed against the neck, tightening and tightening until it pushed through skin and Hannibal burst like an overfilled waterskin. The satisfaction he wanted never came.

Hannibal Lecter woke from his brief respite. It had been a long night with a lot of changes, all of them for the better. The noble had the vaguest notion that he had dreamed, and that it was a pleasant one. Dreams were rare, so he tried to hold on to the last strings of it even as it faded from his mind. Something about Will, which made sense, and a tree. Rather than lingering too long, he stood up and proceeded to get ready for the day.

Will woke up from his dream feeling conflicted and a little hurt. The tangled emotions from the dream followed him out of it. It always was frustrating when he woke up anymore. Increasingly, his quiet dreams of Abigail and Beverly had been superseded by more and more demons visiting. Some, like the one with Imshael, were fascinated with the proceedings between him and Hannibal. Some of them wanted to 'help'(the more insistent ones, Will avoided as much as he could), and others just wanted to watch. The ones that didn't say anything, that were just there for a bit of fun, were more concerning. Will knew that kind of thing was unusual. The only kind of demons that would lay in wait like that were the more powerful ones; the exact kind of attention he didn't want to attract. He had already had enough of that.

The inn that he and Jimmy were staying at was the shabby place called The Black Lotus. Brian had opted to stay at the Bastion d'Argent with his newfound love for felandaris and dragonthorn, which Will had made fun of him for. The alchemist had been play-irritated until Will dug through his growing stash (from his night excursions) and brought him dried royal elfroot and witherstalk. Then, they were even again. Will also felt more comfortable with Jimmy. Something about the ex-Templar's presence was very calming and gave off the same kind of air that Beverly's did. It was playful and solid, which only gave credence to Will's theory that Jimmy had tried to step up and take on Beverly's role slightly once she was gone. It was actually relieving, knowing that Jack had such a stable presence on the team, even if he still would bicker with Brian far too much. While Will also didn't have any fondness for Templars at all, Jimmy's semi-affection for Will made him feel more protected instead of threatened. If demons were lurking, Jimmy would at least try and help him before he cut Will down.

Considering what Will had almost done the night before, that assurance certainly helped. He had almost killed someone and it didn't bother him at all. What bothered him was his lack of guilt and how it only drew more demons to him. This capacity for killing without remorse was irritating, and he knew that, had Hannibal not stopped him, Will would have killed Ingram with only one regret: that killing the man would have felt good.

He was still dressed in nightclothes, a loose shirt and pants, and, for a moment, thought about getting dressed. It was the last kind of comfortable clothing he had, since all of his stuff from before was no more. His belongings had been shuffled amongst the Seekers and lost in storerooms, but that didn't upset him. Jack made sure that he got new clothes, a new bag with new supplies, a new staff, etc. Both he and Jack knew that he would have to dress in a fashion more befitting Hannibal's tastes without it being actually formal or fancy, but the elf insisted on night and underclothes that would feel comfortable for him.

So, dressed in his nightclothes and having just washed himself in the basin, Will ventured out of his room. Before he realized what was happening, Will had stepped up to Jimmy's door and knocked on it. It startled the mage, and he worried that he lost time, but he managed to recollect his journey from his room with ease. He just hadn't been paying attention. The door was opened by a bleary-eyed Jimmy, who took one look at Will and ushered him in. "Give me a moment, I'm going to get some food." Then, he was left alone there. It was a room at a village inn, so it was small and sparse in furniture. Luckily, Will was used to this. His mind immediately transported itself to that numbing exploratory place that it had been in a cell. Patience was something he had learned to cultivate.

It didn't take long before Jimmy was back with the food. It was simple, bread and porridge, but both of them ate ravenously. Will was glad to appreciate something that didn't have frills, but still tasted good. No more gruel for him. When Jimmy had eaten plenty, he asked, "So, we've not really had the kind of relationship before where you would drop by my room unannounced." Will winced. "What's wrong, Will?"

For a moment, he didn't have the words. It was nice to have the luxury to flounder with them. "I-". He stopped. Did he really want to tell Jimmy something like this? "Jack told you about Ingram." Jimmy nodded. "I don't know how to feel about it. I… I wanted to kill him. I was so angry, and ready to do it, and I knew that it wouldn't bother me. I feel guilty, because I

wouldn't have felt guilty for it." He decided not to mention that he would have felt powerful instead. That didn't seem appropriate.

Jimmy set his bowl down. "Have I ever told you about the first time I killed someone?"

Will actually wasn't aware that Jimmy had killed someone. Logically, it would make sense. He was a Seeker and a Templar before that. Their lives were full of violence and death, much as the Seekers were meant to stop corruption. It felt strange to associate death and killing with someone like Jimmy. He shook his head. "I was sixteen. Part of Templar training is to sit in on the Harrowing of some mages. We are supposed to watch and wait, if the person takes too long or comes out an abomination, the Templars are meant to deliver a killing blow. Prior to going in, one of several Templars is assigned to the job; the mages going through the Harrowing are not allowed to know which one. If it is your first time, it is going to be you. The odds are usually in the mages' favor, one becoming an abomination isn't rare exactly, but it happens less often than some Templars would like people to think. I apparently got to deal with the exception." He took a deep breath. "We had been holding for a while before it became apparent they were possessed. It was powerful, so the body didn't change initially. We were almost out of the room when one of the Templars noticed and immediately turned on it. I remember that it was such a long fight, and they finally got it pinned down. They waited on me to deliver the final blow, and I rushed up for it. Right before the sword pierced their heart, I saw a flash of fear. To this day, I wonder if it was the demon or the person, if the demon somehow vacated right before we killed them. Still, I don't feel guilt for what happened. They were ready to kill us and tear apart the Circle; I was protecting my fellow Templars and the mages that lived there. I regret a lot of things about having been with the Templars, but that moment is not one of them. Sometimes I wonder if that makes me a bad person, considering how monstrous many people consider the Harrowing."

Will remained silent, not sure how to process what he was hearing. Jimmy placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, "I get it. When you're doing something and feel it is righteous, it's hard to feel regret and even harder to justify that to yourself. It's natural." Jimmy didn't mention feeling powerful, and Will felt both better and worse about it. Something on his face must have betrayed him, because the ex-Templar frowned. "I'll admit that I'm a little worried, Will. What you're doing with Hannibal Lecter is dangerous and not just because he's a murderer. There's a toll interacting with someone like that takes, and I'm starting to see it take its pound of flesh."

The mage mustered up a smile. "I'm being careful, and it helps that I have all of you in the know. I think if I was doing it all on my own, I would be much worse off. It was damaging when no one believed me, but I already am feeling better about it." Lie. Even if he had their support, he was still in this alone. No one else had to become psychologically intimate with the Highwayman in this manner, not even Jack. Jimmy didn't believe him. Will knew it, just as Jimmy knew that Will knew. Neither of them said anything.

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Jack was pleased to say that he and Bella had spent their final night inside the home of Comte Hannibal Lecter. He had been trying to get her moved to the Bastion this entire time, especially after they had moved the Mabari to the fortress. Everything was packed and ready

to go, but his Lordship insisted that he stay for one final breakfast. Knowing what exactly was in the food made it difficult, but he couldn't afford to make Hannibal suspicious. So, the Seeker agreed and sat down to dine happily. As happily as could be given the circumstances.

Will had informed him after their last meal that he was pretty sure that Hannibal was behaving himself in front of Will. Something about the man waiting for Will to give the go-ahead on eating people.

"I was inspired by dear Will's return to the outside and made a dish inspired by his people." Hannibal set a plate out in front of Jack which probably didn't look like anything a Dalish would make. From what Jack understood, they were a very practical people and often lived hand-to-mouth. They often didn't stay in one place long enough to cultivate vegetables, but would occasionally trade for them. Will had told him that his Clan had only settled long enough to grow anything perhaps twice in his youth and it was only for a season. They ate a lot of squash those summers.

The dish in question was an omelet, stuffed with mushrooms, 'venison', and a variety of what Orlesian nobles might consider 'wild vegetables'. There were onions, tubers, and the like along with simple herbs. He thought he saw some tomatoes and crushed peppers (and maybe… elfroot?), but it was difficult to tell. It was also garnished with tree nuts and edible flowers in a decidedly extravagant fashion. While Jack was deciding whether or not he should tell Will that this was what Hannibal Lecter considered Dalish-inspired food, when the man began listing off ingredients. It was much as Jack suspected with a few things thrown in to make the flavor 'lighter' (as Hannibal put it). Once the noble had finished his introduction, he motioned for Jack to eat. The first bite was divine, and Jack nearly forgot the travesty the food represented. His one moment of blissful ignorance was quickly gone, making it difficult to swallow. He did manage it, but the awareness that what he was eating was mostly likely made off people made it difficult.

"My compliments to the Dalish. I never thought nomads would have time to make such a dish."

Hannibal nodded his thanks for the congratulations. "It is simply inspired by them, but I'm sure they would appreciate it. In an effort to understand Will and what goes through his mind, I began studying up on Dalish culture to the best of my abilities. It is difficult, because we know so little about them, but I fell in love with their dual practicality and reverence for the past. Memory is a precious thing to them, especially the collective memory of their culture." There was a far away look and something like guilt, but not quite getting there on Hannibal's face. Was it possible that the Highwayman felt some sorrow for Will and what he had done to him, especially since he was more aware of the exact kind of violation he perpetrated.

Jack thought for a moment about his own situation. Right now, what he wouldn't give for him to go. He understood why Will was so upset when he confessed the gaps, how it was like he didn't belong to himself anymore. "There are so many things I would give so much to forget now. I used to be afraid of growing older, because that would be what aging brought. A weakened memory meant a weakened mind."

Brandishing a fork, Hannibal replied, "Memory gives moments immortality, but forgetfulness promotes a healthy mind. It can be good to forget on occasion. He chewed thoughtfully,

gazing at the wall, before returning his attention. “What would you like to forget?”

It was easy to say. “Doubt. I let doubt in.”

“About me?”

He shook his head. “About Will.” Will had never been wrong and Jack had stood by the young man’s side for months. The Seeker of **Truth** had a man convicted of a crime he hadn’t committed, regardless of the things that didn’t quite add up (which were admittedly few). Still, Jack may not be able to say that he knows anyone for certain, he can still know their habits. He had had enough of an idea of the kind of person that Will was to simply go along with a rest. Even after he had made up his mind, even after he knew for certain that neither Will’s head or his hands had done anything, Jack refused to believe him about Hannibal. He did now.

“You were convinced he was guilty. With that much evidence, it would have been hard not to .” It was.

The Seeker gave a weak smile. “It is. I feel I may be overcompensating for my previous disbelief by allowing him more freedom than I should.” It was time to feed the lines that Will asked him to. “Lately, he’s been sneaking out, calls it ‘sleeping under the stars’. I’m sure there’s nothing wrong, but…” Showing just the appropriate amount of hesitation, Jack asked, “Would you tell me if there was something to worry about?”

Hannibal returned it, but only by twitching the corners of his lips slightly. “I’m not sure I should speak about you with anything especially private. Will is my friend Jack, and I worry that any breach of privacy could set our relationship back. We’ve just begun to trust each other again.”

Jack bowed his head, and his eyes caught the glimpse of a ring. Hannibal didn’t usually wear jewelry. Of course, when Jack saw what the ring was, a small hint of dread filled his gut. Perhaps his Lordship didn’t expect him to know what it meant and represented, seeing as most people in the Grand Game didn’t even know, but Jack didn’t get by on his looks. “I understand.” A sharp glance at the sun showed that it had grown later than he had believed, and he was happy for an excuse to get out. If Hannibal did suspect that Jack knew what the ring meant, it was a threat. “I suppose I should finish arranging everything with Bella before we go back to the Bastion. I know that Will is going to return with us, but he insisted on staying in the estate in case anything went wrong with Bella.” He finished his plate with gusto, even as his stomach roiled. “Would you be alright with that?”

“More than alright,” Hannibal purred, and it sent a chill down Jack’s spine.

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As Will approached Comte Lecter’s estate close to Verchiel, the land surrounding it was teeming with life as farmers began moving into the autumn post-haste, excited for what the remaining couple of months the season would bring. The air had finally begun to cool, if only in small notches. It was enough to make the work in the fields decidedly less sluggish as people went crazy preparing for harvest season and the bounty it would bring. Hannibal had

owned this property for only half a year and they already seemed to be overjoyed with his tenure as their Lord. He wasn't sure how to associate the people that benefited from Hannibal Lecter's management of their land with the monster he knew. How many people would suffer if he was deposed? There was no guarantee that the next Comte would be better, and anyone that Hannibal chose would be discarded on principle.

It warranted further thought. It was more pressing that he prepared himself for seeing the Comte again. There was no telling how their conversation would go. They met in his study/library. Will had not seen the estate when it belonged to Lord Froideveaux, but he's not sure he would be able to tell what the man's tastes were anymore. Everything, from the decor, to the way the servants were clad, to the materials it was made of, had been altered so that they belonged only to him. The noble had been waiting for him, mentioning that Jack had told him that he would be there for the time it took for Jack to arrange transport for Bella. Will took the appropriate opening and spoke a few paltry lines about his worry for the woman. He was worried for Bella; in the brief time that he had known her, he had come to respect the woman greatly. The worry also spread from Bella to Jack. Will believed that Jack's total dedication to stopping Hannibal Lecter might come from his helplessness in her situation. He would take the help, but knew to be wary if he saw anything too self-destructive.

Perhaps it wasn't the best way to start the proper conversation, but Will had to know. With everything that had gone on and the press of his own shame present on his mind, the question was unavoidable. "Do you have any regrets?"

Hannibal considered it for a moment, the thought being meticulously examined for a trap or hidden motive. Will's motive for asking was twofold: the incident involving Baron Ingram and… Abigail. Not sure of what exactly his Lordship would say, Will was actually curious about the answer. The reply was careful. "With every choice lies the possibility of regret, but if I choose not to do something it's usually for a good reason."

And if it was a matter of action rather than inaction? "I have plenty." Abigail. Ingram. Peter. Georgia. Laurence. Garrett Hobbs. There were so many and they all had names and faces. They always did. Even going further back to Arvani and leaving his Clan. To lost nights in the Arbor Wilds. To leaving the Avvar, feeling called by the spirits back to what some called civilization.

Hannibal nodded. "A life without regret would be none at all."

Hesitating, Will spent his moment observing the room. His Lordship carefully adjusted his seating, and Will noticed that he was carefully hiding his hand. The elf had always been under the impression that his Lordship was in constant control of his body, highly aware of what each individual part was doing. Distracted, he answered, "I regret what I did in the stables." It was more truth than he meant to give and more true than he wanted it to be.

"You were lucky I was there."

It was as if Hannibal's claim brought him back from his diversion. "Lucky?" Will scoffed. He pulled up a shield, an act around him. It stung that he wasn't lying completely. "I don't know if I'd call it that. I was doing exactly what I needed to do as I wished to. It wasn't a mistake

to try, the mistake was allowing you to stop me. I would have been **lucky** if you hadn't been there."

"So you regret your inaction." It was if his voice echoed Will's older thoughts. Inaction and action. Was he acting right now?

"That's more accurate, I suppose."

"I'm surprised you feel that way," supplied Hannibal. "Were you deciding what to do with the regret you would feel later in mind? Were you anticipating it? Expecting it?"

The general air that Hannibal gave off was not unlike a voyeur. He was feeding off of emotional responses, greedily taking in every expression and word as if that was his way into Will's rawest form of self. Disconcerting was a generous description. Will shifted in his seat when he replied, "Yes."

It was a good thing that Hannibal seemed happy to keep the distance for now, given the expression of relative sheer joy on his face. If Will didn't know any better, he would say that the man would likely try and hug him. The thought of being touched or coddled was unbearable. "Anticipating regret isn't healthy." No, it wasn't, but that wasn't going to stop him. "In fact, it often influences people into making dubious decisions. You must adapt your behavior to avoid feeling the same way again." Will rolled his eyes, very plainly showing his derision. Strangely, it didn't seem to provoke a reaction from Hannibal, for good or for ill. That was, until he said: "Will, would you close your eyes for me?"

Will raised an eyebrow, then acquiesced. "Imagine a version of events you wouldn't have regretted." Will immediately opened his eyes again.

"You don't want me to do that."

"And why not?"

Will wiggled his fingers by his head to illustrate his point. "Mage, remember? All that will do is ring the dinner bell for demons later."

"You aren't going to sleep."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter." It did, actually, but he was banking on Hannibal not knowing that. Will didn't want to imagine a version of events he wouldn't have regretted. Already knowing what he would see, the idea, closing his eyes and putting idle thoughts into more tangible substance, was distressing. A couple of whispers in the dark had to be put out. There also was a very slight chance that a strong enough demon could put him to sleep against his will, but that hadn't happened since he was a teenager. "Due to me being a Dreamer, I attract demons in droves. Their presence is almost painful, and I'd like not to pull more of them to me."

"What are you so afraid of?" Hannibal sat up, moving forward. Behind his eyes, Will could see expectation and suspense. He wanted so badly to understand Will, that the elf was able to

slip through some of his defenses. It was unfortunate that he had to give so much of himself to do it, but the small pieces of vulnerability that were shown were absolutely worth it.

Will breathed, clearly his thoughts. Unwillingly the events were playing in the background, but he willed them away. “Besides the demons? I’m afraid that I’ll see it for what it was.”

“And that is?”

“A missed opportunity. You once told me that one day I might find a man so bad that killing him felt good. I liked killing Hobbs for precisely that reason. I know that I could have felt like that again.”

“And what does that feel like, Will? Excitement bumping in your chest like a cold medallion?”

Another breath, letting out coiled tension that had unexpectedly built. Will allowed it to wash over him, then flow away with the exhale. He smiled, grinned really, and looked up to Hannibal’s eyes. The flinty red of them brimming with the anticipation the man was so careful about hiding away. “A quiet sense of power.”

“Remember that feeling,” Hannibal said, and smirked, finally showing his hand (literally). Will was surprised to see that he had adorned it with a ring. Much as the Orlesians enjoyed flaunting their wealth and power, Will had never seen jewelry on the Comte. The man chose to instead decorate his raiment, having them made of extremely expensive materials with rich color and subtle embellishment. His mask, while relatively bland in color design, was bold and ostentatious with notches and divots for elaboration. A ring was different and would not have been worn or so deliberately hidden and shown without purpose.

Knowing exactly what it was Hannibal wanted Will to do, he decided to raise an eyebrow and gesture at the ring. The Comte looked so fond at his mild defiance that Will almost regretted it. Only almost though as it was immensely satisfying to shock the man. “You are not the only visitor I will have or have had today.” Will was aware. While Jack wasn’t exactly a ‘visitor’, he was a guest. “Someone will be coming soon that may appreciate it. I suppose I could share a **little**.” Will shifted in his seat again (not due to discomfort this time), and turned to stare at Hannibal, giving him a clear show of his complete attention. “This is considered a puzzle ring of the Black Fox, a notorious thief of legend. There are many tales in Orlais of his exploits and deeds, most of them romantic. Supposedly, there are only ten, one for each of his fingers, but none have found them all. Very few possess them, I was lucky enough to receive it as a gift.” Will cocked his eyebrow, a little confused by the very strange tangent the conversation had moved to.

“The Dowager, my mentor in the Grand Game, was kind enough to give it to me. In fact, most people that have these received them from the Dowager. They are a gift to those that impress her with their skills at navigating the court.”

Will nodded. It was easy to imagine, with Hannibal’s general demeanor and obvious skills at manipulation, why a great player of the Grand Game would be so fond of him.

The conversation didn't last for much longer. He soon got a missive stating that Jack was ready to go and was currently collecting his wife from one of the upper floors of the estate. It gave a brief pardon for his hasty departure, along with a promise from Jack that he and Hannibal would speak again soon. Will took the opportunity for what it was and bid the man adieu. While inside the halls, the elf was careful to step lightly and surely, not allowing a single servant to think him either suspicious or fearful, but the moment he got outside, Will rushed.

He rushed right into a noblewoman that had been coming from the opposite direction. It was only sheer luck that both of them managed to notice the other in time and dance away from an outright collision. He looked up to see a young woman, roughly his own age. She was wearing the current fashion in Orlais, a long and slim skirted dress with a sort of over-corset on the bust, but there were embellishments added to take attention away from the strangeness of the outfit and the deep neckline. Her hair was up in spiraling braids that pulled into a loose curled bun, lacking the covering Will had seen a few Orlesian noblewomen wear. Jewels were strung through her hair and she had a beautiful choker with jewels on it as well, but it didn't hide the bruising he saw beneath it. The mask didn't cover her mouth, and gave the illusion of feathers with mosaic glass going from above her right eye to below her left. The non-glass pieces looked to be reinforced porcelain with gold filigree. Everything about her screamed wealth just as much as it did veneer.

"My apologies, my lady," he said with a bow, curled hair dangling annoyingly on his face. When he rose, she looked amused.

"I don't believe I recognize that mask. Whose house do you belong to?"

He smirked. "I belong to no house but my own."

Behind her mask, he could see her eyes give him a once over, taking in the mask, the hair, the clothes, and such. "I believe I may have heard of you. I remember an elf being connected to the Comte, but I'm afraid I can't place what else I know about you."

Will grimaced. He was hoping to have left the conversation by now. "I'm the mage that didn't kill all of those people. They're probably all over my story in the capital."

"Ah," she replied and continued to scrutinize him. "I don't get out much, but now I can place a few of the rumors I've heard." She grimaced in return. "Although I doubt many of them are true going by the look on your face."

Jack called him from the distance, and he had never been more thrilled to hear the Seeker (now High Seeker) call for him so impatiently. "I doubt so as well. If you'll excuse me, your Ladyship, I must be going." Then, he hastened to meet up with Jack. He could feel her eyes on him until he joined the man on the carriage and rode off with him and Bella.

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Margot was used to taking in every aspect of a person when she walked into the room. A red-headed bard with a sweet face once told her that it was the little things that gave away a person's situation and demeanor, small things that could tell you their secrets or how

dangerous they were. Usually, the bard-was it Leli?- cited shoes. The very first thing that Margot noticed when she visited him today was his ring, not concealed but out in the open where anyone could notice. It was a very clear message, but she wasn't sure if it was meant for her or the elf that was just in here. Considering the state that he was in as he exited, it was at least for him. It might have been for both.

It was one of the infamous puzzle rings of the Black Fox, the few that floated around the Court were almost always gifts from the Dowager, the ultimate player of the Grand Game. Not all nobles were aware of them, but those who were knew one thing about the person that wore them: they were ruthless and cunning beyond measure.

They had managed to impress the Dowager in their mastery of the Grand Game, which always came from the spilling of blood.

It was a clear sign of a formidable player, especially for one like Hannibal Lecter where there were no rumors at Court of a single death being attributed to him. The few times someone tried, they were laughed out. If she could get Hannibal on her side, Margot had a powerful ally in her struggle against her brother. She would have to make sure he was on **her** side.

"I am curious Lady Verger. You speak of your brother with such disdain, almost like he is beast more than man."

"He is."

The Comte raised an eyebrow. "You don't recognize your brother as a person. You dehumanize him as much as he does you."

She readjusted her legs to a more lady-like position, sipping the tea he had generously supplied earlier. It was spicy with cinnamon, ginger, and cloves, probably a Rivaini blend. "At least I'll never be the worst person I know," she said smoothly.

"We all tend to see others as less human than ourselves. It is present every moment we put self-interest first. It is why so many of us look down upon the elves, dwarves, and Qunari among many others," came the reply.

Margot was trying to decide how to parse that. Was he saying that he wouldn't help her out of self-interest, pointing out that he realized she was here for selfish reasons, or merely making a comment about a condition of humanity? It wasn't clear, which put her on edge. "My brother is less of a person."

"And you are less of a person for it."

It was a simple statement. By rejecting the person-hood of another, she was making herself other. Still she poked, "Did you just dehumanize me?"

He smiled, not taking offense at her nudge. "I find that it is easier to do what one must if you take a self-first mentality on occasion." So his comment earlier was meant to be all three. "I often experience better results. Even when helping others, I must do so. It is easier to help them effectively, even when what you do is initially painful to them."

Now for her to take a gamble. This could end well for her or very badly. “I met someone today. An elf named Will? It took a moment for me to place him in your social group, but the rumor mill abounds in the court, including how you followed him to this estate to be closer, even when he was imprisoned in the Templar fortress. I have to wonder how you helped him.” He said nothing. “Our last conversation would have me think that you’re supportive of me killing my brother, and I appreciate that support. I really do. I have to wonder how much you are willing to support me in this.” Tip her hand. “How supporting of him are you?”

“What do you imagine?”

Margot put down her tea cup carefully. She contemplated. It was difficult to fit the puzzle pieces together and few of the corners weren’t quite right, but she did her best. He followed Will, was beside him despite the fact that an association with an elven mage was destroying his reputation. From what she had heard, Hannibal Lecter was a man that provided himself on his image. She had also heard that he was an avid student. “I imagine that you found something that drew you in, so you decided to tiptoe your way into the vaults of his heart and mind and coax something you saw waiting there. He fascinates you beyond measure, so much that you’re willing to follow him and ignore rumors and reputation. The Empress already considers you a close ally, so you aren’t worried about your position. I think I’m beginning to understand.”

He studied her, clearly not threatened by her observations. “What is your interest in Will?”

“My interest is in you. Last I heard, he tried to kill you and you still brought him back into your home.”

There were lines around his mouth that creased, just a little. That may have been too much. “Will was very-publicly found innocent of all charges. He has done nothing wrong.”

“So was my brother, but not because he was innocent.” She allowed him to mull that over before softening the blow. “I’m not going to do anything to Will or you. I just want to understand your arrangement. I need an ally, your Lordship, and a mage will do just as well as a Comte.”

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With Bella Crawford no longer in the house, Hannibal wasn’t worried about Abigail wandering around on her own and getting caught. All of the servants at this estate were completely loyal to him and would immediately eliminate any that were potential threats (by whatever means they saw fit). They were also more vigilant and would keep people from entering the house that shouldn’t be there. He had told her that with very little chance anyone would see her, so she could now roam the house so long as he didn’t have guests. However, he did make her promise that if anyone notified her of a visitor or that someone was sneaking around, she was to return to her quarters immediately.

Abigail wasn’t happy that she still had to sleep underground, but she was willing to take what little freedom she got and enjoy it to the fullest. All of the stipulations were worth the time that she got to spend not cooped up or hidden away. The estate had a lot of places that she could explore (including a few secret passageways that Hannibal had installed in the house).

She also spent time mapping out the individual rooms, the servant passages, and the secret passages, giving her something to do. In half a day, she had yet to finish the first floor, which was reassuring. Hannibal had also taken the time to show her his library and told her that before she disappeared into her room at night, she was free to take a few books with her. She just had to return them to their proper places when she was done.

The biggest downside to all of it was that the servants avoided her. At first, Abigail had thought they were simply ignoring her so they could go about with business as usual. When she saw a servant on break, she tried to speak with them, but they blanched and scurried off after she tried to talk. It only took a couple more times until she realized that they were going out of their way to not engage with her. When she tried to speak with Hannibal about it, he only mentioned plausible deniability and how the more people that knew, the more in danger she was. Abigail supposed that he was right, but that didn't mean that she felt any less lonely.

Her thoughts strayed to Georgia and what she might be doing at the moment. Her friend was probably having trouble re-acclimating to the Circle after so long adjusting to her emotions alone. Abigail hoped that her blonde friend was aided by their time together spent in close quarters, but there was no guarantee of such a thing. Whatever happened, Abigail prayed that Georgia was better off. It was the least she could do for her best friend.

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Trailing through autumn-leafed trees was a spray of gore. They dappled the ground and brightly colored surroundings with deep red and ugly brown, creating a strange mix of colors that easily caused a few upset stomachs. Not for the first time, Will was struck by the untouchable fortress of nature and its uncaring growth and existence, despite the tragedy that happened under its canopy. They had to take a trip a day or so southwest of the Bastion for this particular display. An unsuspecting couple from a nearby village had decided to take a "walk" in the forest near their area and were ripped apart for their troubles. Then, another set of bodies had been found quickly afterwards. Normally, the villagers would have just dealt with it on their own, but they considered the viciousness to be abnormal.

Will wasn't sure why **the Seekers of Truth** were being summoned here to what was initially reported as an animal attack until he got there. There was a ferocity to it that was definitely out of the ordinary. The essence was distinctly non-human, but came across as too monstrous to simply be an animal.

"No guts, no glory," Brian said with a half-smile. He turned to Will to get a reaction, but the elf just raised an amused eyebrow at his antics. The alchemist pouted, but seemed glad that he could joke around Will without receiving a glare. It was refreshing and made him think wistfully of a time when he could just watch the banter unfold.

A shout came from Jimmy, also grinning. "There's guts everywhere. Those are probably the most intact." He pointed to an area somewhere above Brian's head, who immediately ducked and swore. There were, in fact, guts hanging from the tree branch that they had just walked under. Will side-stepped as Jack passed under them with only a side glance to the viscera.

The High Seeker about-faced to the both of them. "Demon?"

“There is certainly a viciousness to it that comes typically with demon attacks,” Will replied. “Usually, you see this kind of behavior with Rage demons, but they are also accompanied by scorch marks from the flames that come with them. Maybe it could be one possessing a corpse?” he supplied.

Jimmy approached. “That does happen from time to time, but the corpse would still be here. They don’t have a lot of will, and rage demons aren’t really the exploring type.” Everyone quickly scanned the surrounding forest while Jack double checked to see if everyone was there.

“I don’t think it’s a rage demon,” Brian said, but he was still checking the forest for any sign of lingering undead or demons. “Possessed corpses still use weapons, but these bodies were mangled with claws. That one there even has a bite taken out of it.” That was in reference to a man in pieces hanging from a couple of tree branches. His throat had been completely ripped out, to the point where he was nearly decapitated.

Will had a theory, but he was going to keep it to himself. There was a tale that his Keeper once told him to caution him about holding onto hatred. The Keeper of Clan Alvarnehn had much hatred in his heart and cursed the humans that destroyed his children by creating a monster made of spirit and flesh named Witherfang. His Keeper warned him to stay far away from the Brecilian Forest, for the creatures there wish to exact revenge and do not care for anything elf that was not Keeper Zathrian. It was as this thought was idling in his brain that he noticed something that made his stomach curl. “Is that?” he whispered, hoping he was wrong.

He was not. Barely attached to one part of the head was an ear. It was small and barely there, but the structure of it suggested it was much longer than a human’s and pointed to boot. An elven man. “Can you check the other bodies for pointed ears?”

Brian blanched. “Sure, Will.” It took a few minutes, in which Will could do nothing but stare at the near-decapitated body. Then, he received a confirmation.

Will swore. “So someone targeted elves with this attack!”

Everybody was staring at Will, looking horrified and pitying. Jack was the only person who said anything, “It appears so. And it certainly has a…” He glanced around to the carnage that littered the trees. “Well, its motive seems either vindictive or sadistic.”

“Another point for not an animal,” Brain said. “I also noticed that all of the, um, parts are there. Nothing eaten or taken.” Will felt sick.

“So, what do we do?” Jimmy asked.

Jack sighed. “We should look into any recent mage or demon activity. There’s a chance that we’ll have to wait for another body to drop before we can do anything, unfortunately. I have a feeling if it was a demon that had been sitting in the area for a while, it would have done something like this a lot sooner.”

“Unless it was just targeting elves and didn’t have access to any,” Will replied, trying to allow the strange numbness he felt when he learned of Abigail to take over. It was there, lingering at his fingertips, but wouldn’t spread beyond that.

Jimmy nodded. “If I recall correctly, the other bodies were also elves, some from the local poor sector.”

“Not an Alienage?” Brian asked.

“It’s too small to have an Alienage. Anyway, that’s probably why nobody said that anything was crazy about the first attack. A second one would put people more on edge.

In a strange contrast for when they first met, Will was grateful to Jack. Sure, a lot of terrible things had happened to him after joining up with the Seekers, but he also had actual friends for the first time in many years. He had spent so much time alone, wandering from village to village, that he had forgotten what it was like to converse with other people without script, pretense, or outright lies. One such friend was Peter, whom Jack had transferred from the care of Baron Ingram to work at the Bastion d’Argent. Considering that everyone at the Bastion was aware that Peter was not the one to commit the crimes, they pretty much let him roam free. That is, unless they had visitors, then they were required to put him in the dungeon for appearances sake, lest the Baron make a fuss. Will was still not used to being affiliated with a Chantry organization. There were no elves or mages among the Seekers of Truth, but Jack insisted that he wanted to make Will one once the business with Hannibal Lecter. “There is a place for you here, Will,” he would say, and Will would be flattered and uncomfortable all at once.

Among the Chantry folk, he felt out of place, no matter what Jack said. So, he sought solace in someone that could understand his situation. Peter was such an interesting and compassionate person, so it wasn’t hard. It helped that the more he interacted with Peter, the less Will could see himself. Peter was becoming his own person and took great joy in caring for the animals that littered the fortress. Once they returned, Will made a beeline to visit his friend. Jack just shook his head with a smile and told him that they needed to meet in a while so he shouldn’t take too long.

Well, Will made no promises.

“How are you doing?’ he asked Peter, who was overjoyed to see him.

“Better. When they took me away from the barn, I thought the worst was going to happen. It’s nice here.” Peter still shook with every word, but there was a certain comfort in his demeanor that didn’t exist before. It reminded Will how being out from under the thumb of someone that abused you could heal so much. He hoped the same would work for him, when Hannibal was finally taken away. “I’m happy that they allow me to stay with the animals. It’s comforting.”

“I imagine so,” Will said. “Animals don’t judge and they don’t condemn.”

Peter had a couple of small animals, Will thought they might be cats, and was scritching their heads. A small smile was warming his face, giving Will vicarious joy. “Do you have

animals?”

Will nodded. “I have around seven Mabari. They’re a handful, but they are worth it. They’ve been a little sad lately, because there was another Mabari here, but she’s been spending a lot more time with her owner and can’t play.” Bella had been trying to encourage her to give her some space and play with the others, but she hadn’t listened.

“Animals form friendships just like we do,” Peter replied with amused insightfulness. “I’m sure they’re just missing their friend.”

“They could use another,” Will said with a smile. “Would you like to meet them?”

Peter’s eyes lit up. “I’ve never met a Mabari! Could I?”

“Of course, Peter.”

Will helped his new friend up with a smile and led him to Will’s space. For now, the Mabari were there waiting on him, but it would be nice for them to have somewhere safe to stay for the next few nights. They couldn’t join Will on his nights under the stars when a demon might attack their group just for Will being an elf. Besides, he liked Peter, and it would be nice to introduce the reserved man to his hounds.

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Nodding, Jack said, “These things take time. Hopefully, we’ll find evidence before another body drops.” He placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, firm and grounding. “I know you probably want to say something or send them off somehow. We’ll give you a moment before we have to go.”

“Thank you,” the elf whispered, unable to look away from his kinsmen. Jack stepped away and motioned for Brian and Jimmy to follow him. Soon after, Will was alone, with only the dead in his company.

Later, under the night sky, Will fell asleep. His Mabari were safely with Peter, so he felt far more comfortable making a nest of his bedroll in the trees. Up there, he was out of reach of any ground threats that his hounds couldn’t warn him about or that he would have to protect them from. They may be born and bred highly intelligent war hounds, but occasionally they thought themselves more dangerous than they were. Especially Buster. He liked picking fights with anything that happened to cross his path and be too big for his tastes. This included great bears. Being without them, while difficult, was ultimately safer. His dream was a respite, a return to some semblance of normal after the more distressing ones lately. *Until it wasn’t.*

It had started out simple. Will and Abigail were camping under the nighttime sky, crickets chirping around them which gave the area a strange vibrating feeling. They were cooking a fish over a campfire, laughing about something silly that had happened earlier during the

day. There was something off about her smile, it was a little too large. She placed a gentle hand on his and then asked him, "Will. Are we going home soon?"

Home? "What do you mean? Aren't we home right now?"

She shook her head. "No, we aren't. He's waiting for us." The young woman placed her fish to the side after only a nibble and stood. "Come on," she said with an outstretched hand.

Will frowned, not sure where she was going with this. It was his dream, so he had control of himself. He didn't move. "Abigail, I think we are home. This is where we're supposed to be." She frowned, looking slightly upset, but then sat down anyway.

They ended up eating in silence. It was stifling and full of memories Will would rather not have. A small campfire with just the two of them reminded him of the times they were travelling together on the road to Red Crossing, of the nights that they weren't near an inn. The Mabari were piled around them, a wall against the night's chill that inevitably occurred in the south. They would never be able to do it again. Hannibal had taken it away.

Hannibal had killed a young woman that Will had taken into his heart as a child, for a while as a younger sister and then as a daughter. During that trip, they had bonded. Abigail stretched out and placed a hand on his. "Don't worry. I'm sure we can go back when we're ready."

"Back?" he asked.

She grinned, "To Hannibal. He's been making a place for us to be together?"

Will woke gasping for air, tears in his eyes and a renewed sense of anger.

Another day, another scene. This one was a little (only a little) closer to the Bastion, which meant for about three less hours to travel. That really only meant three more hours to sleep when they were trying to get as much done as they were. Will had already heard rumors that people thought Jack to be a strange administrator. He apparently was a lot more hands-on than most other High Seekers. Considering what Will knew of the man, it was inevitable. He was sure that the reason Jack wasn't a High Seeker prior to them needing to hide Chilton had less to do with the Lord Seeker not liking Jack and more with the Lord Seeker (as much as Will disliked her) liking Jack. If the new High Seeker was actually expected to fulfill the administrative role instead of the Seeker role, Jack would go crazy. Will knew it. He had also asked Brian and Jimmy, and they thought so too. None of them thought it was a good idea to bring up to Jack.

The new sight was extremely similar to the previous with one key difference: none of them were elves. This attack was reported soon after due to the fact that it was a merchant caravan instead of a Dalish patrol this time. Nobody had to stumble across the massacre. As such, the victims were about two humans and a dwarf, all of whom had decided to move matters elsewhere and convene privately. That's what the caravan had told the guards, but Will was pretty sure that meant they were sneaking off into the woods to have sex. He was pretty sure that they would have rather people heard them than what happened. Once again, they were ripped apart and scattered among the trees and on the ground. The death almost seemed… not

playful but challenging. There was a slight suspicion in Will's head that their killer knew that he was being tracked and enjoyed it. This was not something rage demons did.

Demons of Wrath and Rage were always primarily their emotion; there was often very little nuance in their personalities. That's how Fade beings were, they were their concept and the nuances of it, trivial things like depth did come, but only with time and a certain amount of self-awareness. Rage and Wrath (even Vengeance which was rarer) did not 'do' self-awareness. It could be a Pride demon or a Desire demon, but something about it felt off. He had avoided checking at the last scene due to the strong possibility of it being a demon, but this new aspect added meant he would need a little more aid. Will closed his eyes and dipped his mind into the Fade, drinking in what knowledge it had to offer. He only hoped that nothing decided to hitch a ride back.

There was an energy thrumming through his body too present to ignore. He had to keep himself from careening down the slopes of the small hill and barrel through towards his quarry. The thrill of the hunt was accompanied by the need to tear and rend that had wormed its way into his soul through years of existing alongside it. He had worked so hard to cultivate its return, and it still eluded him from time to time.

They were in position, so he pounced. His thoughts raced with meat and blood as he snatched one and flung it to the side. He grabbed the beefiest one, eliminating it before it could become a problem and then crashed into the smallest. It put up a fight, clawing and biting at his fragile flesh, which irritated him. The blood and skin were reminders of the frail form he occupied and how much better it had been. If only fur could grow anymore and warm him during autumn nights.

His teeth weren't the right shape anymore, but they still tore flesh just as easily and in the same amount of chunks.

Will opened his eyes and stared at the corpses. Jack noticed his lapse and then returned, so the High Seeker stood beside him. "At least their pieces are bigger. We can actually get them identified this time." The mage didn't say anything in return. "I suppose the demon just got bored partway through."

"Not a demon Jack," Will finally said. "There's something more animalistic about it. It's a man, but he doesn't want to be."

"Doesn't want to be? What does he want to be?"

He swallowed before replying, still not sure what to make of the feeling himself. The best way he could describe it was an animal, so he did. "I don't know, but he believes it so hard that he can imagine it."

"As sloppy as this looks, there is a distinct organization to it," Jack replied. "It's savage, but definitely meticulous."

"I don't think-" Will stopped, then gathered his thoughts back together. "This one isn't personal. He didn't know them and didn't need to. They were just meat. Prey."

“And the last ones weren’t?” Jack asked, pointedly. They most certainly were as far as Will could tell. Whomever it was, they certainly put a lot more effort into destroying the previous group, the elves, than they did this one.

“They weren’t,” Will confirmed. “That’s likely how we’ll find him.”

“I think you’re safe, Will,” Jimmy joked later, after several hours of research.

He raised an eyebrow. “I am? Good for me.”

Brian tugged at the book Jimmy was holding so that he could read whatever passage the ex-Templar had found. “The void are you talking about?” Jack also raised an eyebrow, trying to prompt Jimmy into speaking.

“Well, given what we’ve learned I think I’ve figured out who, or rather what, our mystery killer is!” They all stared. He did like his suspense. “I think we’ve come across a genuine werewolf.”

Brian snorted and Jack shook his head, but Will paused. His thoughts wandered back to Witherfang and Keeper Zathrian. His Keeper had never told him what type of monsters lurked in the Brecilian Forest, but with a name like Witherfang and it being an intersection of spirit and flesh… “Tell me about werewolves,” he told Jimmy, keeping his thoughts quiet. Nobody believed in werewolves, not really, but maybe? Both of the other men in the room went silent when they realized that he was taking it seriously.

“Well, um…” Jimmy glanced back through the book he was holding. “So, apparently they're supposed to be wolves bonded with spirits, usually Rage or Hunger, something usually considered mindless. If they’re powerful enough, they can bite people and they become werewolves as well, although we’re not sure how that change occurs as it isn’t an infection.”

“Some sort of blood magic maybe?” Will posited.

The ex-Templar shrugged. “About as good as any other explanation. Well, if they’re wolves only, they just start attacking people although it’s with an intelligence not usually associated with wolves, and while packs are dangerous, they don’t actually attack people unless they’re desperate or threatened. If they’re turned, sometimes they can keep their minds, but that usually requires outside influence and they can still be influenced by their new bestial nature.” He smiled. “Apparently Mabari can sense them. This book claims that there was an outbreak of werewolves a long time ago in Ferelden and that’s why the dog is so popular there.”

Hilarious. “That’s what you meant by I’ll be safe.”

“They are war dogs. They’ll know its coming and then rip its throat out,” Brian joked, but Will thought that idea was less funny. His hounds were sweet, and despite the fact that they had protected him on occasion, he’d rather them not see combat.

“Do we know when the last outbreak of werewolves happened?” Will asked.

“This one’s old, so not really,” Jimmy replied. “But that could be a lead.” Jack walked away to send some missives to other branches of Chantry-associated organizations and the rest tried to see if they could find anything else.

“Jack,” Will murmured. “I think Hannibal might know.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked as he was penning the message.

“Just a feeling.”

Jack nodded, looking extremely tired. Will couldn’t blame him. Just thinking about the Comte made him exhausted due to the tumult of feelings the man caused. “I’ll take you to him later.” There wasn’t anything left to say, so they parted. The elf rejoined the rest of the squad and took their good-natured ribbing about his ‘hoard’ of hounds as best he could, but his mind was already on when he would see the Comte next.

Will stared past Hannibal, silent. Jack had brought him to speak with Hannibal under the guise of grabbing a few final things and then running into town. As for his own excuse, Will simply ‘admitted’ that he had asked Jack to allow him to see Hannibal. The Comte had asked why, which had led to an awkward conversation about headspace that Will would rather not remember. The conversation felt far too much like idle chatter and brought back memories of his time under the press of Hannibal’s thumb, when his mind was about to explode thanks to the noble’s machinations. Will redirected it to his case, hoping the brutality of it would intrigue the nobleman.

He was right.

“No beast is more savage than man when possessed with power answerable to his own rage.”

“Or in the usual case of werewolves, actually possessed with the power of rage,” Will snarked, his nerves shoving him towards irritation. “This isn’t about that though. I thought rage was a large part of it at first, but the second murder says something different. This is someone trying to grasp onto something, not rage. Emotional responses usually can be traced back to something, but this doesn’t seem to have provocation.”

Hannibal was practically leaning off of the edge of the seat he was occupying, a ridiculous thing that only just managed to not be a lounge. “What is it?”

“Ultimately? Instinct. I think it’s possible that the first set of murders did come from a place of rage, but the mysterious part that drives him is striving for something more primal.”

Nodding, Hannibal replied, “I can certainly see that for your description. He wants a power that he no longer sees as possible. Animals depend on the limitations of mind and body to shape their thoughts, their instincts.”

“And his mind and body changed,” Will finished. “A werewolf that is no longer? I don’t think they work like that.”

“We have evidence that there are more than one type of werewolves. There are those possessed by spirits and those transformed from men.”

“Huh,” Will said as he thought through it. “We don’t have any confirmation of the latter, but that would certainly make sense. So, maybe our killer was turned into a werewolf and then somehow turned back?”

“It is by our testing limitations that we learn our power. He learned his power, but then was given more limitations.”

That’s when Will pulled the errant puzzle pieces of the picture together. “This isn’t about him giving into instinct. If he was transformed back into some form of non-werewolf, then he thinks that by settling back into the behavior he participated in, he might return to that. He found his power in instinct, so he’s reclaiming it.”

Hannibal leaned from the lounge into his space, which made Will have to fight to keep his body from tilting back on principle. It wasn’t comfortable. “Can you imagine tearing someone apart Will?” The elf said nothing, too frozen by the forwardness of Hannibal’s words and posture to find the appropriate response. “Whether by magic or by your physical hands? Using your power to rend someone asunder gives it a certain amount of intimacy. You were going to with Ingram, is there a part of you that is still unsatisfied?” The noble leaned even further into his space, going so far as to get up off of the lounge and crouch. He was careful not to be improper, but only just. Something about his posture was boxing Will in, even while his arms were held loosely and there was plenty of space for him to retreat, should he try. “When you sent a man to kill me, were you imagining killing me yourself? Were you possessing him? Did you live vicariously through him as if your hands tightened the noose around my neck?” He grinned, showing the barest sliver of his teeth. “Or were you simply hiding?”

“I’m not hiding now,” Will attempted to assert, but it sounded unsure and weak.

“You are,” the Comte corrected. “Our friend is reveling in his instincts and has found his power there. You should do the same.”

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The young man had come to him a year ago, tears in his eyes as he blubbered to explain what had happened to him. He had been traveling through the Brecilian Forest when a giant wolf leapt out of the woods and bit him, causing a tremendous amount of pain. Randall Tier had laid there, the agony too strong to even allow him to move, until several of the same creatures came and took him with them. It was then that he was told he had been cursed to become a werewolf. For a long time, Randall had lived like that, running through the woods with his pack wild and free. As time went on, the savage instincts that plagued their kind began to take over. He told Hannibal that he had seen several of their kind go completely feral, losing their minds to the beast and attacking anything they could, including their kin. Instead of fighting it like most of his kind, Randall had decided to try and give in to it. The idea of turning over his mind to his baser nature excited him; being a werewolf had finally allowed him to feel free and right in his own body.

Then, the Hero of Ferelden came and ended the curse that was afflicting him and his people. Every single werewolf in the Brecilian Forest that had been created by Witherfang had been returned to their natural form, and the spirit that had given them his gift had been destroyed. He had not managed to become feral and the body that had made that freedom attainable was gone. Randall Tier was human once more. Hannibal had found him after the young man had attacked one of his servants that had strayed too far into the woods of Red Crossing, then he taught the young man how to better hide what he was and keep himself 'safe'. The Comte wasn't sure what caused him to flare up like this, but he thought that he ought to confront him, just in case. This was the third time it had occurred after all.

"We're closed," shouted a voice from inside the shack. Hannibal wasn't the kind of man that usually dropped by somewhere unannounced, but it wasn't like the tannery was a chateau. Besides, he was aware that Randall was more likely to spite him for daring to stand on ceremony. It irked Hannibal that he wasn't very mannerly, but when a person spent the defining years of their teenage and young adult life as a wolf, one could hardly ask for much better. He knocked on the door again.

The door slammed open. "I said we-" Randall froze, and only approached after he had a moment to examine his visitor. A wide grin had split his face in half as he gently bowed, as one did before their patron. "Comte Lecter," he greeted, pleased to see the man that had sponsored the initial creation of his tannery had come to visit him.

"Hello Randall," Hannibal returned. "I see that you're doing well for yourself."

He nodded. "People enjoy the work that I do. They wonder why I'm so good at it when it smells awful and why I always manage to get high quality pelts for myself. They never bother to think that I've smelled worse or that I hunted for myself."

"And what all have you been hunting lately?" The noble asked pointedly. "If what I've heard is true, you've found some very interesting quarry."

"One should only try for the best," he replied. With some hesitation, he continued, "Their blood and scalps taste like home."

"And the elves?"

"What I'm used to. Rare delicacy. I didn't expect that it would get such a reaction out of me to see Dalish again, but it did. Now that I've had a taste…"

Hannibal smiled. "I'm not here to stop you. I just wanted to warn you that they're going to find you, and it will be soon. I thought I'd give you some advice."

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It took them forever to find him, but they eventually did. The entire group had to spread out and spend the day checking every bit of information that they could find on a potential werewolf. It wasn't surprising when many utterly dismissed them outright, claiming that they were following a silly Fereldan tale. Others took the opportunity to accuse their neighbors. After this happened around four times, Will could tell that Jack was becoming tempted to

disregard any claim that said a specific person was a werewolf. Will was inclined to agree with him, especially when those that were being accused were often those that people didn't understand or simply those that stood out from the crowd.

Eventually, they managed to get a small lead though. In one of the smaller villages, there had been reports of animal mutilations and fierce poaching. It was the same at another. Soon, they found a third one, all of which were within a few hours of each other. They had set up nearby a water source so that they could better support one another.

They spent about a day searching the area that was triangulated between them, keeping careful watch for any signs of animals, specifically larger than normal wolves, living there. It had taken them that entire time to admit that there was nothing there. If there was a werewolf living there, there was a strong chance that they were excellent at covering their tracks. If not, they were wasting their time. An entire day of searching such a small area led them to believe that latter, which Will was getting ready to buy into as well.

It wasn't until they decided to stay at one of the inns that they got some news. Several people were talking about a tannery that had just set up outside of the village with a young man that came highly recommended from the other two. Apparently, he moved between the towns to give himself some room, should the smell cause too much offense. He was apparently not considered a people person, and, as most people here were perfectly content to leave and let be, managed to get by because he was good at what he did.

He was a drifter, had lived in all three places, and apparently had only been around for a little less than a year, which is before, but not too long before, the troubles in this village began. Will knew, based on what Hannibal said, that this young man, named Randall Tier, was trying to achieve mastery over himself by losing it over his instincts. He wanted to utterly give into them. The noble's insight into his condition meant that he likely knew of Randall Tier, if he didn't know him personally. Furthermore, there was a chance that the young man would be ready for them and already planning for their arrival.

He gave his warning to Jack. who took it in stride. "We just need to play this cool. See where he goes with it and follow, keeping a careful eye on the paths that we pick. Hopefully we can get some evidence and arrest him without comment from the Chantry."

"Hopefully," Will muttered, not quite quietly enough for Brian and Jimmy not to overhear it and snicker.

He was slightly off from where they had anticipated. His home was ten minutes from the outskirts of the third village, far enough into the woods that he had easy access to his supplies and could easily get away with poaching (and it did amuse Will when he realized that this was Baron Ingram's land). Randall lived in a place with a small tannery attached, the smell of pickling rotted flesh and stagnant water obvious from far off. The young man, presumably Randall, was raking a small knife over a skin to remove loosened hair. Hides in various stages of the process were gathered around him, although there were fewer than Will had seen in the makeshift tanneries of the Clans or in normal human villages.

"Randall Tier?" Jack asked, and the young man turned towards them without falter. It was almost like he had already known they were there. He had sharp smoothness to his face, akin

to what he had seen on nobles, despite the fact that he was especially hairy for a human in their mid-twenties. He had a deep tan that came with someone that lived and worked outdoors, and the stench that came with working in tanneries emanated from every pore and stitch of clothing. Despite the subtle wildness that came with his demeanor, the thing that drew Will in most were his eyes. They were an unnatural amber, near gold, color that seemed to glow. If the rest hadn't tipped Will off about his paranatural nature, those would have.

He nodded. "I am. Someone told me that strange looking Templars were asking about town for me?" They all glanced at each other. They had tried to be discrete when they asked a few villagers where the strange recluse Randall Tier had lived, but apparently someone had warned him prior.

"Close, but we're known as the Seekers of Truth. We're a Chantry organization," Jack explained. If this had been several years ago, they would have run with the Templar excuse. It was Jimmy that had explained to him the incident at the meeting of Grand Clerics and how the incident had the Divine withdraw their permission to work in the shadows. It was for the best. "I'm High Seeker Jack Crawford. This is Will, Brian, and James of House Price." He gestured to each of them in turn.

Those yellow eyes fixed on him. "Will's not your name. Even city elves eschew going by human names."

"It's the name the Avvar gave me," Will coolly responded. "It is still a name that was bestowed upon me. I'm not going to deny it." Both Jimmy and Brian were now looking at him curiously. Apparently they hadn't connected the dots that Will wasn't his birth name, which didn't make sense to him. If his name was actually 'Will', among elves it was more likely to be Ghilan, Sulen, Taren, maybe even Viran. Those were just the ones that came to him off the top of his head.

"And?"

He wasn't going to entertain this. He hadn't gone by his birth name in years and that wasn't going to start now. "I'm Will." That was the end of the matter. There was an uncomfortable pause before the conversation continued.

"Your leather and furs are really good quality," Jack led.

Randall bowed, his eyes never leaving Will. It was making him uncomfortable, so it was a good thing that his default was avoiding eye contact. Every time he accidentally looked in his direction though, those yellow eyes were trained on his. "I appreciate your compliment. I hunt and tan the pelts myself."

"We're wondering if you may have sighted any strange animals. We've seen evidence that there's some that are tearing up land near here, slaughtering animals and people alike. We're hoping to find answers and heard you know the area the best."

He nodded once more. "I do. I haven't seen anything of note recently, but I suppose that I've been cutting back on my expeditions. Heard a couple of weeks ago about the incidents you're

referring to and have been going out of my way to not get into trouble." The man gestured to his relatively small amount of merchandise. "It's hurt business lately, but people understand."

"We also heard that you're fairly new to the area. Some of the smaller incidents actually happened after you first arrived," Will put out, feeling a pang of satisfaction at the small wince he received for his trouble.

"I understand where you're coming from." Randall grimaced. "The eyes, the lack of history, the fact that I'm new and from Ferelden. I know that it doesn't look good, but I've been careful and I don't do anything like that. I left that country during the Blight and found my place here. When it was safe to return, I didn't see a reason to. I've made a life here."

"And we're sorry to disturb it," Jack finished, glaring slightly at Will and ushering everyone back to the cart. "I apologize, but we're only being thorough. Thank you for answering our questions, and if you do see anything, please contact us. I've left our information with the local aviary."

Will sighed. As much as he was sure that Randall was the one, there was no immediate evidence that stuck out. Anything that they did was already being heavily scrutinized, and they didn't need that kind of trouble right now. The evidence they were looking for was absent, but Will could still feel eyes on his back.

After the incident with Randall, Jack couldn't find another reason to keep them in the area. Baron Ingram, still irritated with their prior work with Peter and what happened in the barn (although he hadn't pressed charges), made it very clear that they were not going to be welcome for much longer, so they ungracefully were told to get out (in not so many words). He did, and the group sat in the Bastion mulling over what to do next. There wasn't a lot of evidence left to collect from the bodies, and, without more murders, they weren't going to be able to return to the villages. Will told Jack his suspicions that Hannibal knew about Randall, and they discussed his next move.

Logically, he would have to go back and speak with the man, but Jack couldn't go with this time. It was partially because being a High Seeker gave him a lot of bureaucracy to take care of which he had been neglecting in favor of helping solve murders. It was also partially due to the fact that, if Will wanted Hannibal to legitimately believe he was moving to the Comte's side, he would have to start going without an escort. They managed to devise a way for him to make his excuses and approach the Comte. He had already expressed to his Lordship that he had been staying the night in the countryside and that Jack was too guilt-ridden (he actually was) to try and stop him, so it was a simple matter to say he used the opportunity to go out-of-bounds and visit Hannibal.

He still used the day to rest though, and stayed in for another night among his dogs. With neither Alana nor Miriam sharing a room with him, Will had plenty of space for himself and ended up pulling the bedding off his bunk to sleep among his Mabari on the floor. The next day, when it was suitably late enough, Will hopped on the back of a horse, provided by Peter, and rode to Hannibal's estate.

It was about halfway there that a horse came barreling from behind a hill and drove him off of the narrow road he had been following. It pranced as he nudged it away from the grass that

would distract it and the rocks that would hurt it, and the other rider got their bearings as well and turned to face him. It was the same woman that he had nearly run into when leaving Hannibal's that one time.

When she saw his face, she laughed. "I suppose I deserve it. This time, I almost ran into you." He chuckled nervously and patted his horse down to soothe it. Will wasn't really in the mood for a chat. "I am sorry. I don't know if you remember me…"

"I do," he interrupted, then looked shame-faced. He hadn't needed to be so sharp with her. "I apologize. I'm a little on edge."

"No need." She urged her horses closer and then leaned out with her arm. "Lady Margot Verger."

He clasped it, then realized that he had heard her name before. It was back when Chilton had decided that he needed lessons in Orlesian politics if he was going to take down Hannibal. "Marquise Verger?"

Margot laughed again, but this was decidedly less pleasant. It was cold and grating, even a little cruel but not directed at him. "Just Lady Verger. I have no say in the estate nor will I be getting it. It all goes to my brother."

Will frowned. "It was my understanding that Orlesians didn't usually care about the gender of their heirs, so long as they had them."

"They don't, but they care when they aren't interested in making heirs of their own," she said, nearly growling. He had stumbled on a sore subject. She paused for a moment. Will thought about leaving, but something on her face said that she might just follow him until she said her piece. "I'm curious. From what I have heard about you versus what I've seen of you I don't know what to make of your relationship with Comte Lecter."

Great. He had also stumbled across someone that seemed to believe the rumors. "Why do you care?"

"I was hoping to find an ally in him. My brother is fairly cruel and our family has dealt with all sorts of private carnage that the Grand Game never has touched. I thought asking you might help me see just what kind of person I would be getting in bed with." She grimaced at her own wording. "So to speak."

Carefully, Will replied, "I suppose that depends on what kind of ally you want."

"I just wanted support, but it was to my surprise what kind of things he said he would be willing to support me doing."

Furrowed brows. "What kind of things?"

The horse rider smiled, her straight teeth peeking from behind her lips like road markers. "For all of the things he did, I tried to murder my brother."

Will raised an eyebrow. "I assume he had it coming."

“Did he ever. Comte Lecter told me that if at first I don’t succeed, I should try try again.” She tilted her head and he carefully avoided her studying gaze. “I heard that you tried to have him killed, but no one could prove it. Don’t worry, it’s a quieter one.” He blinked but didn’t otherwise respond. The elf hadn’t been prepared to start playing the game this early, so it threw him off to have to control his reactions in front of someone not Hannibal. He glanced up at her grin. “I don’t suppose he told you the same thing?” His silence spoke more than words could say. “Did he have it coming?”

“What do you think?” he shot.

“I can’t say that I know.”

“Neither can I,” he muttered.

“It sounds like we have similar issues.” He heard the creaking of leather as Margot readjusted. “This has been rather enlightening. I’m afraid I am needed at home, but I do hope we speak again soon.” Will only turned when he heard the clopping of hoofs against the dirt head a different direction. A quick glance revealed that she had gained some distance, so he returned to his trek to Hannibal’s, curious about just what kind of things Hannibal liked to encourage in his visitors.

The ride hadn’t taken much longer, but that was mostly due to the whirling thoughts Will had about what he wanted to address Hannibal with, now that he had met Lady Margot Verger. Once was an instance, Twice was a coincidence, Thrice was a pattern and all that. Three people (probably four if he considered what Hannibal might have been doing with Abigail) all being encouraged with whispers of murder. Little birdy indeed.

By now, his entrance was rote to the servants and guards of the Lecter estate. He carefully affixed his mask and double checked it in a nearby window pane, before adjusting his appearance accordingly. Clothes were Hannibal’s armor and they could serve him as well. They escorted him inside and to the study, where he was waiting with wine. Will’s presence caused his lips to uptick, and he began pouring a second glass of what he informed Will was ‘Orlesian Rouge’. It was rather red.

He took a generous sip, and then interrupted whatever words Hannibal wanted to start their conversation with. “I have to wonder. When you sponsored me, I wasn’t the first one. Who else would I need to talk to in order to understand what kind of mentor you were and are.” Already, the noble was hanging onto his words. Will was surprised that the image reminded him of someone that had been waiting for the latest installment of their favorite serial to come out after it was years overdo. “If I asked Randall Tier, what would he have to say to me?”

“What did he say to you?”

Will smirked. “Very carefully, he mentioned absolutely nothing about you. Yet, I could hear his every word pruned by your choices and guidance. He told us all about how he achieved his new life in Orlais. Randall Tier is a success story for the common man.”

“And is he?”

“I'd say he certainly is a success story for you, Comte Lecter. You clearly can be very persuasive.”

His face betrayed nothing. “You know very well that persuasion is not coercion.”

Will leaned forward, for once dipping into Hannibal’s space. “I left his home feeling bereft. I am not the first, nor will I be the last. I wonder how many others are out there, just waiting, and what kind of guidance you chose to give them.”

“You are connecting some very strange lines of thinking,” Hannibal replied, still neutral. “There is no connection between he and I, as you learned.”

The elf tried a different path, a card he had yet to play since it became available to him. “A colleague of yours visited me while I was still in the White Spire. She said that she had studied under the Dowager with you.” He gave a meaningful glance to Hannibal’s ring, conscious of the fact that Baroness du Maurier had not been wearing one herself. She seemed like the type of person much more likely to. “She was one of my few well-wishers.”

His Lordship seemed surprised, if the subtle curve of cheeks and eyebrows could portray that with ease. “Bedelia came to see you.” Apparently this was not something that he had expected the Baroness to do.

Will nodded. “She told me that she believed me when the only other comfort I received was from a dead boy. I think she knew that there were others like me. May even have been one of them.”

“Fascinating.” The word was spoken so deadpan that it revealed to Will that he had indeed been taken off-guard. He also wasn’t very happy.

“Did you kill her?” he asked flatly, hoping that she wasn’t dead. As much help as she hadn’t been after the fact, in the moment it had kept him sane.

“No.” Hannibal had promised not to lie to him, and Will believed that the man would keep his promises. So, Will chose to not question it. If he meant it, he meant it. It was also confirmation for Will that he was irritated, the tone betraying more than his face. It told Will that the Baroness’s survival was not for Hannibal’s lack of trying. She had managed to outplay him.

“I’ll admit that I’m curious about what you think when you think about killing. You do it so easily and without regard to others.” Otherwise he wouldn’t have fallen apart at the seams.

Hannibal seemed delighted by the line of inquiry. “I think about the Maker, and all he has done for us. He has killed and allowed so many to be killed over the hundred of thousands of years of our civilization. Cathedrals and Chantries fall, killing their occupants with extreme prejudice. Wars are fought over belief, Exalted Marches called on those who are different. If the Maker is gone, He doesn’t care that He left us with all of the beauty in the world and its terrible but inevitable fatality. If He hasn’t, He loves watching us scramble.”

“Does Randall Tier believe in the Maker?” Will asked.

Hannibal hummed. “I would ask the same of you, but I’m aware of your devotion to the Creators. I will say that perhaps a more personal conversation with Randall Tier might grant you the understanding that you are trying to achieve.”

Will would be lying if he said that declaration didn’t sound ominous.

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They were saved in her bag. The raven came with them earlier that day, and she was happy to receive them. Even so far away, they were trying to include her. Alana felt too busy now that she was busting her ass trying to be the best Seeker that she could be. All of the trainers that she had worked with claimed that she was moving faster than any of their previous students. Personally, she thought it was because their minds were still young and they had to form connections. Alana already had experience, even if they were frustrated that her mind wasn’t as malleable as they hoped. She had also received a letter from a ‘secret admirer’, but Alana threw it on a fire. Romance required commitment, and she was dedicating herself to this cause and this one alone.

Alana , Jack’s letter said.

I’ve sent Miriam on her way. She was having trouble readjusting to life as a Seeker after her trauma, and I can’t blame her. Now that I’m High Seeker, I made sure to have some contacts watching her and making sure that she’s provided for, even if I have to dip into my own funds. This life is what caused her to suffer the terrible experience she endured, I will make sure that it provides for her-

Bella is doing better. She’s still hurting, but both of us moving to the Bastion seems to have helped her. Will’s Mabari are still keeping her company, seeing as he spends most of his nights outside of the Bastion-

I’m worried about him. I know that you didn’t believe us when we talked about Hannibal, but he is throwing himself into it. I feel like I’m using him just like I used Miriam, and I’m afraid for what might become of him-

Alana, said Jimmy’s.

I hope you’re doing well. We’re adjusting to all of the changes. They just seem to keep coming lately-

You’ve made fun of us for it before, but I think you may have been right about Brian. We’ve been working together for years, and I never once thought of him as more than a friend. I’m pretty sure he’s straight as an arrow, but knowing how to define my feelings does make them less confusing. Look at you, Alana the Love Augur. Looks like Jack’s title is going to have some stiff competition-

I’m sure Jack has expressed his worries about Will. He’s strong, but I’m not sure what kind of trauma lurks for him that none of us are willing to see. Please find it within yourself to write to him. I think you’d be surprised what you find-

Alana, said Brian's.

Look, we're doing fine. I promise you that it's not just Jack and Jimmy saying it to keep you from worrying, not that it won't stop you. You certainly tried to be the mother of the group, that's Jimmy's job. Please take some time to care for yourself as well. You remind me of Jack that way, perfectly willing to run yourself into the ground-

Jimmy's been acting kind of weird lately. It's fine. It's all fine. It's not fine; he's my best friend and he's acting weird. I know you are big on people's personal privacy, but could you check on him for me? I'm not saying just around me either. He doesn't seem as happy as he used to be, this whole thing is weighing on him. There's a burden he's carrying and I wish I could do something for him-

I know you always felt like you were just there to replace Will and then Beverly. You weren't. Alana, you are your own person. You told Jack that you needed to find a place that you fit, and I respect that. Even if you didn't feel like you did among us, I hope you know that we didn't feel that way-

There was nothing from Will. She had to stop a pang of disappointment, because she had known there wouldn't be. Without her permission, Alana had already forgiven him. She had been Will's friend for years and knew that he didn't do anything without reason. While she doubted that Hannibal was the Highwayman as Will claimed, she did know that he believed it. If he was running himself ragged trying to prove it, she only hoped he found the closure he seemed to need in other ways.

She sent a couple of reply letters and hoped that they would reach her old team. Alana let them know that they were safely in Halamshiral and wished them good health. Her quill hovered repeatedly over a potential fourth letter, trying to decide whether to bother writing it at all. It sat so long that the ink pooled on the sheet and ruined it. She grabbed a fresh one and started over, sure that she was going to make up her mind and just write to Will, make sure that he was okay.

Another page ruined, and she decided that words on paper might not be enough for her to express feelings. When the group she was traveling with returned back to the Bastion (as they inevitably would), she would speak to him then.

V^-V-^V

Hannibal watched as the young man he had helped so long ago hovered in the tree line. They were waiting in the forest closest to the Bastion d'Argent, watching as Will set up his camp for the night, waiting for him to fall asleep. The fire was gently flickering shadows across the young man's face and transforming it into something otherworldly. Randall was watching, his eyes glowing in the dying sunset and dawning moonlight.

"The solitude of what you do is to be respected, and I intend to honor that. Wolves may hunt in packs, but only with their kin." He turned to look at the young man, his body bracing for the run. "Especially werewolves. I only come to offer you words of encouragement."

Randall said nothing. In the mindset that he was in, there were no words. Only action.

“You are becoming, Randall. You are returning to your truest self. Your body, voice, and will blossom into something that no one can truly understand.”

He looked past his eyes and into his soul. Hannibal saw the bared teeth, sharpened manually to call back to what they were. He wore clawed-gauntlets that didn’t cover his palm so that he could teaser into flesh and still feel the blood burst. Reinforced hide, made by Randall himself, was covering his body, giving him the appearance of fur. Randall Tier may not be a werewolf in body anymore, but he had done his best to achieve the closest thing to it as a human.

“Revel in what you are,” Hannibal said, giving the same encouragement he had tried to give to Will and Margot. Then, he slipped into the shadows and back to his home. The Comte would wait and let the Maker decide who would return to him with their kill, but he could see far enough that he knew who was going to win. This was Randall’s pinnacle and he couldn’t go farther. At least here, he could die as himself.

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Something was off. Will could practically taste it. He had ridden around for hours trying to find the best spot with plenty of cover and terrain that he could use to his advantage. His last conversation with Hannibal Lecter had reeked with threat, specifically the one of an untimely visit with Randall Tier. He had done nothing to deny his relationship with the former werewolf, and that only put Will on edge more. There was an extremely high chance that Randall would be his guest tonight, and he wouldn’t be allowed the chance to talk.

The most unfortunate aspect was that he had to camp so close to the forest. It was partly so that they wouldn’t be interrupted by anyone else and partly because Will knew the woods well. There was a chance that if he made a break for the tree line, he could weave his way up into the branches to avoid attack. He already had his crossbow primed, it would just need to have a bolt loaded. The reason this was so unfortunate is that it left a large swathe of ground that Randall could cover before Will could notice him. Furthermore, the trees were only a slight advantage. Randall had lived in forests for a long time as well, long enough to learn their twists and turns at least. The only reason Will would take his chance there instead of elsewhere is because that elsewhere was largely open and flat with one or two hills that were more like mounds. Lithe and fast he may be, but he guaranteed that Randall was probably faster.

He prodded at the fire, adding some more wood to keep the flame burning. He had collected firewood earlier so that he could periodically add it to the flame whenever he woke for the night. Elves had decent night vision (better than humans at least), but only decent. The light from the fire would help him when the former werewolf ambushed him, **and** he’d have a decent weapon if he felt like launching it at his attacker. Fire scared most people off when it was flying towards him.

Also on him were some lyrium potions. He had never fought a werewolf before (and the books they had didn’t have much information, so he didn’t know how magic affected them. Most things had adverse reactions to magic, so Will figured it wouldn’t hurt. He could cast some of the few offensive spells that he knew and get creative with the rest. His Keeper and

the Avvar had mostly taught him utility, so he expected a lot of his mana would be drained with healing.

For the moment, he enjoyed the quiet. Soon, the world would erupt with violence, and he would have to take his next step in his 'relationship' with Hannibal. The Comte would be expecting something to happen after this challenge, and it wasn't like Will could just magic progress into being. This was a test just as much as it was anything else. Hannibal would want to see how far Will was willing to go or how far Will wanted to go (in his eyes). The moment stillness ended, he knew he would have to cross a threshold, and it wouldn't be easy to return from it. The moment he spared Hannibal, Will knew that this game was most likely a one-way journey, but hadn't thought about the moment when that would become inevitable. If only it could last a moment longer, the calm before the storm.

A twig snapped.

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The house was nearly silent, which made Hannibal have to stifle a grin. He had informed his guards and servants that if they were to see Will on the premises, they were required to leave without question and to inform Abigail that she must remain hidden as well. He hadn't expected for the young man to somehow make it back to his estate before he did, but Hannibal had taken an indirect route to get some supplies before returning. It seemed to have given the elf just enough time to arrive before him.

He quickly shed his riding clothes, eager to see where he had gone. When he passed it, Hannibal glanced over at where Abigail was told she had to go in case of emergencies. It was disturbed slightly, which could mean that she simply hadn't been as careful hiding or that Will had found her. Just in case it was the latter, he made sure that he was prepared to answer uncomfortable questions. It might destroy his plan, but he was sure that he could come up with something, should he have to.

It took a few minutes to locate him. Hannibal went to all of the rooms in the house that he usually ventured to, even taking care to visit the study, but there was nothing. He checked his room, the kitchen, the dining hall, and a couple of other places before he realized where Will had gone. There he was, in the small ballroom that Hannibal through parties in. Randall Tier was splayed out on the floor in all of his glory, only himself in death. There were parts of the skull severely damaged and the neck was nearly purple with bruises, almost like Will had put a tremendous amount of weight on it. There were burns littering his limbs, and Hannibal followed them up onto the arm of a different person, also covered in burns.

The young man of the hour, Will of Clan Lavellan, was sitting cross-legged next to the body. He was beautiful in his blood-soaked splendor, having only cleaned up minimally. His clothes were still burned and shredded, most likely from whatever fight had taken place, and he was only armored in his leather greaves, which had suffered the same treatment as his clothes. Otherwise, it was just enough so that he didn't track blood or otherwise leave a trail in the estate. In a few of the cuts, Hannibal saw shards of glass and, more worryingly, the blue of lyrium. When Will noticed Hannibal's presence, he grinned savagely, being free of the mask allowed Hannibal to see that it reached his eyes. A burst of pride filled Hannibal at

his creation. He brought Will to this, allowed him to see his potential. They weren't done yet, but this had been an important, even vital step.

Will tracked his eyes and cocked an eyebrow, amused with Hannibal's quiet awe. Sweeping his arm across the ballroom, he then moved it in Hannibal's direction. Without standing he asked, "Shall we dance?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the title is directly a callback to last chapter. I've always thought that Su-zakana and Shiizakana in the show were linked in how it showed victims and proteges, survivors and murderers. In the original show, the former focuses on Margot, Peter, and Will (here Abigail), all victims trying to survive someone with power over them. Then, the next episode focuses on Randall, Will, and Margot (here also Abigail), all people manipulated by Hannibal in various stages of murder-butterflydom. I've always thought that this was a huge transition point for season two, shifting from viewing Will as a victim to someone capable of murder, with the end of the episode and the beginning of the next hammering it home. It helps that Shiizakana is usually a main course dish (or the main course itself). Sorry about the end notes, I don't have people to discuss the show with. Also, both titles are another very deliberate reference (one that led into the previous one). Dragon Age deep divers, I wonder if you can guess what it is. Here's a hint: elf stuff.

On a Dragon Age note, I feel like werewolves are something really cool that didn't really get addressed again. There was that one side quest in Dragon Age 2 that purely depended on your choices in Origins (if you allied with werewolves or not) and mentions in codices in various legends, but nothing else. Also, I'm actually playing through my Hero of Ferelden in this world, and she brokered peace. I think I originally made her a city elf, but I'm revamping her to be a dwarven noble because I had SO MUCH fun with that playthrough. It was the first time that I entered an area, spent some time in it, and then left before doing the main quest. Having all of those people in Orzammar calling her kinslayer and otherwise berating her made me angry, so I rushed off to work with the elves and werewolves instead of even siding with anyone.

Ghilana felassan

Chapter Summary

> "It is a dance poor Flemeth knows well. Let's see if she remembers the steps." -Flemeth, Dragon Age: Origins

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> Another chapter. I'm a lot more behind on writing than I want to be, since school has been fairly packed. Basically, I signed up for five classes, but it feels like I was tricked into eight. I also just got a new job after being unemployed for a month and a half. It's been interesting.
>
> Ghilana felassan: To guide a slow arrow

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment that he heard a noise, Will jumped into metaphorical action. His body tensed and then relaxed just as abruptly. He needed to keep his muscles loose for movement when Randall Tier would inevitably rush him. He made himself nearly completely still, allowing his posture to stay as loose as possible and one hand to move away from the fire. Straining, he listened for movement. For several impossibly long seconds, there was nothing. He could feel his ears almost twitching, they were listening so hard. He almost had himself convinced that it really was nothing and that he could relax again, but there was something inside that told him otherwise. If he went too long holding himself tightly, Will knew he would regret it, but his aggressive relaxation wasn't helping him either. His constant reminder to not hold his muscles in place was forcing it to happen more often, creating a strange and distracting loop.

It took another ten minutes of silence before Randall pounced.

Will, unfortunately, heard his steps too late and was unable to dodge out of the way. It was only enough that he changed the trajectory that they went flying: straight into the fire. They rolled into it, charring up Will's clothes and burning through whatever hides his assailant was wearing, treated though they were. Sparks flew, bathing the world in orange. A few errant ashes flew into their faces, which burned his eyes. Tears were streaming down his face, plastering the ash and dirt onto his cheeks in a sticky mess. Randall swiped at him, very human nails sharpened into claws and accompanied by small blades.

They bit through cloth and skin, finding a narrow space where his borrowed leathers didn't cover. Will tried to shove Randall off him, but the former werewolf simply changed position to keep his leverage. While Will struggled, his opponent did something vitally crippling. Will, arms extended away from himself to shove Randall off, wasn't protecting his center; Randall managed to stick one of his sharpened claws into buckles under the guise of pushing the elf further down. He only managed to notice what Randall was doing after the chestpiece was loosened and subsequently torn off; Randall tossed it somewhere away from camp. His shifting attention did give Will the opening he needed to wedge and knee up and injure Randall by aiming a shove to the side of his abdomen.

He flew to the side and Will rolled away, quickly trying to locate a weapon. Randall was already getting up and so he didn't have time for a truly damaging spell. He needed to give himself more time. Already casting it in preparation of contact, Randall's simple touch signaled for Will to release a wave of energy. It had been so long since he had used magic in combat that it was a little disorienting, but the spell did its job and blasted Randall back a ways; he hadn't been expecting magic, which surprised Will, so it blew him several yards away. Will's mind began racking itself for a spell to end this quickly. He didn't have much time to contemplate it however, as his opponent was already recovering and rushing over.

Neatly, he dodged, but wasn't quite ready for Randall to swiftly turn and grapple him. He was physically weaker than Randall, both because months of captivity can only do so much for building muscle and his form was built for dexterity rather than strength. Rather than bringing him to the ground again, Randall threw him. Once again, Will found himself rolling through the fire and the sound of glass shattering nearly through him into a panic. Sharp pain lacerated down his torso as he slammed into his bag and was coated in glass shards dripping with lyrium. The pieces stuck to his skin and some even got caught in his armor. Not willing to risk shards of glass coated in lyrium digging further into his skin, Will yanked off his vambraces and gauntlets then shook out his arms. The only armor left on his body were his greaves, which meant he was mostly unprotected. Iit also meant armor was weighing down his legs.

He looked up and saw that Randall was already rushing towards him. Without thinking, Will tossed the pieces of armor in his hands at the charging ex-werewolf's face, which stunned him just enough for Will to cast another spell. It was an old familiar one, a spell he still had trouble casting because of the associations he now held with it. A crushing prison of force, the same kind that killed Garrett Hobbs, slammed into Randall, forcing him to the ground. Will held it as much as he could, his total concentration bent on keeping Randall down. Already, he could feel his hold breaking, something that hadn't happened with Hobbs. While he still had time, Will moved to the fire and grabbed several large sticks, the charred mess of them already burning his hands. It was just in time too, because Randall broke free and Will had just enough warning that he was already swinging.

It swat Randall in the face, the flames licking and catching on the exposed fur of the hide. Will knew that he had likely left it for the desired aesthetic, but that kind of treatment was highly impractical, especially now that he was having to choose between going after Will and letting it burn or dropping to put it out and giving Will the advantage. He chose the latter, probably (arrogantly) assuming that whatever advantage he lost he could quickly regain.

Will did not waste the opportunity. He quickly attacked, throwing himself forward. He brought the flaming sticks onto Randall, letting the human panic when more of him was catching aflame. Then, he dove on top of him, bearing all his weight down on Randall's head. The force threw the rising Randall back to the ground and Will pushed a leg into his opponents neck. He picked up Randall's head, straining against his own knee, and slammed it onto the ground. He did it again and again until Randall went limp, not dead but dazed.

Exhausted, Will glanced around for something suitably heavy. It being the Exalted Plains, he managed to find a decent sized rock and bring it back with him. Yellow eyes stared up at him, unfocused thanks to the various blows to the head Will had already managed, before Will struck, swatting the pest that Hannibal had sent after him.

Hannibal was staring at him, face impassive except for the lines on it declaring their glee. It was strange, how Will now saw the meaning between them where he was so sure Hannibal was unflappable before.

His entire body hurt, glass shards still in his arm from the fight, bruises and scratches carving up his body, and burns peeking through the rips in his clothes. Despite all of the pain, his mind was fuzzy and far away, filled with the haze of battle, even now that the physical fight had been long over. It buzzed and left his mind floating above his body, watching as he glibly called out, "Shall we dance?" His hand was outstretched to the Comte, whose face might have made a fond smile, if it wasn't for the way his eyes were watching his palm. The bubbly feeling tempted Will to light a flame in his palm, just to watch his Lordship's face, but good sense stayed his uninhibited mind.

Lecter reached forward and grabbed his hand, pulling him up from the cross-legged position he had been sitting in. His legs unbowed smoothly, but the motion itself caused him to stumble slightly and Hannibal kept him propped up, even as he snorted. Soft hands carded through his loose hair. It occurred to him that he had tried to keep it up when he visited Hannibal. He wasn't sure why it wasn't now. The noble looked over at the body of the former werewolf that he had sent to Will, then he took Will from the ballroom, ostensibly to find him a place to rest.

It wasn't an entirely correct assumption. Hannibal did take him to a room for rest and relaxation, but it was the master bedroom, which immediately plummeted the feeling Will had been experiencing. Icy tingles shot through his veins and he glanced worriedly into the Comte's face. Something obvious must have shown there, for he left Will in the archway of the door and grabbed things further inside before retrieving him and taking Will to the guest suite next to him. "I apologize. That was presumptuous of me," Hannibal said and escorted the younger man inside.

The change of location only soothed Will a little. It was still a bedroom and Hannibal was still in it. While he doubted that Hannibal would try to force anything, the elf wasn't sure if this was part of a loyalty test that he had to pass. It wasn't until Hannibal directly told him that he wasn't going to try anything that Will felt more comfortable. "I know you have

several reasons to not feel comfortable, and I can assure you that physical desires are the furthest thing from my mind." He sat Will down on the bed and bade him to take off his shirt. The Comte turned around for propriety's sake; Will saw that he was laying out bandages, cleaning supplies, and other instruments needed to treat wounds. "You're in no fit state in mind or body for anything like that to be appropriate"

They sat for a moment as Hannibal finished preparing the supplies. Hannibal started a fire after he turned to see that Will was shivering. This was to Will, who was too cold without his shirt. Hannibal had him lay down on the large bed, which was far too soft and fluffy. Running his hands over the coverlet smeared blood on it, making Will wince. The Comte only paused before leaving the room. He was alone, and the buzz had returned, making it difficult to tell how much time had passed. Hannibal came back and had him sit up.

He had gotten a washbasin, but saw the extent of the damage from the fight. The noble actually frowned and then moved Will to an en-suite washroom and brought the medical supplies with him. From there, he began cleaning. It started with his hands, then arms, up his shoulders and down his torso.It was uncomfortable, making his skin feel tacky and damp even as it cleaned the blood off of him. The noble took special care cleaning around his cuts where the lyrium potions had broken, which Will was grateful for. There was no telling what might happen if he had accidentally gotten lyrium in his blood. Soon, he was asking Will to take his pants off too, which Will only allowed after he was told he could keep his underclothes on.

There was a tub, which he was eventually persuaded to sit in. He retreated, not super comfortable with just how much blood and bits of fat and flesh he saw sloughing off of him. Hobbs' death was nothing like this. Neither was Laurence's. Hannibal noticed. "Don't go inside, Will." He looked at the death washing off of his protege with pride, which only served to make Will sicker. "I can see why this would cause you to retreat, the way a cliff can when we stand at the edge. Stay here, with me."

Will's voice betrayed him, breaking. He had tried so hard for so long to be a good person, but the Comte had tainted him. This death was on both of them. Randall may have been a murderer, but it had been excessive. "Where else would I go?" he asked, idly fingering at a glob of blood that had congealed on one of his arms. He flicked it with the rest that was draining from the tub.

"You have everywhere to go, as long as you buttress your mind against deterring forces like guilt." Hands pulled him out and handed him a towel. He dried off. It hadn't been a bath, but it had done its job cleaning him up. There wasn't a single bit of red or blue on him now. Two hands moved him to the bedroom, where he was deposited on the centerpiece once more. His wounds were being bandaged and taped. The glass that hadn't been cleaned out carefully extracted. It was almost like it was happening to someone else, so Will had to keep himself from picking at any of the cuts. "You should be pleased. I know I am."

Will looked up into the gently smiling face of Hannibal Lecter and looked away just as quickly. "Of course you are." The noble idly tapped the inside of his thigh, the place Will knew Mathieu had cut him. Frederick had been happy to inform him of the gory details. "I

suppose this makes us even then," he sighed, before turning his face to the window that shone blue light in the room.

He felt Hannibal nod as his weight shifted to reach a particularly difficult burn. "An act of reciprocity."

"I didn't think that **polite** society would allow such a thing."

Hannibal replied, sounding amused, "Clearly you have not spent much time in the Orlesian court."

Will snorted. "Clearly."

"Many find that death drives us to greatness, the threat of it pushing us to reach for higher heights." Hannibal took Will's bruised and sliced hands in his own, putting butterfly bandages on the worst parts with salve for the small burns where Will had to reach into the fire-pit. "You did this with your hands?"

Will nodded. Hannibal didn't reply, so he spoke, "Yes." Nothing. "It was very intimate."

"Good," he could hear that Hannibal was pleased. "It deserved intimacy. Tell me, did you imagine me when you were killing him?"

"No. Yes," Will admitted in a whisper. It felt awful and wonderful to say. He could say his worst thoughts aloud when with this man and not be judged for it. He might even be praised. Still, those thoughts were not acceptable to society for a reason.

His Lordship's voice was a whisper right behind his ear. "How did it make you feel?"

He swallowed, nervous energy bubbling. "Alive."

"Then you owe Randall Tier a debt," his Lordship said and finished putting the last bit of salve on his burns. "You should repay it in the morning." He left.

Later, once Randall would be taken care of, Will laid in the dark, looking at the trappings of beauty and wealth that Hannibal had wrapped around himself. Hannibal assured him that the scene was mostly clean and that the Seekers of Truth wouldn't find anything of them there. That was half of Will's worry, but it was rapidly becoming less so. He looked out of the window near the ridiculous bed, swamped by bed coverings and watched the stars shimmering, forming constellations. Hopefully, the Creators were smiling down on him. He would likely have to ask the aid of Fen'harel tomorrow.

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Abigail had heard the ruckus when Will arrived at the estate and the servants urged her to go through one of the secret passages up to her room and lock herself in. No matter how much she wanted to see Will, Hannibal had impressed it on her again and again that it was too early. She would only end up hurt when she tried to ask for things that he wasn't prepared for.

Sighing, she waited out the night, too awake to even try to sleep. The brunette had been listening into the halls as servants and guards dispersed, leaving the entire chateau eerily silent. For a long period of time after that, there had been nothing, until the door opened and she could hear the footsteps coming from expensive shoes echo through the house. Presumably, Will had snuck in while the servants were still milling around (if the whispers she heard were true). They still weren't sure what to make of Will, in their eyes a Dalish elf that was having a strange relationship with their human lord. While they liked Hannibal well enough, it didn't change the fact that he was human and in charge of them.

It was early the next day that Abigail saw Will leave. Still dark as night early. She carefully watched through the window as he departed, bandages still slightly visible if an observer knew where to look. Hannibal must have been caring for him last night. He had told her what he was going to do, which had worried her at first. It made sense though, that Hannibal wanted to gauge where Will's head was after Clarke Ingram. Obviously, Hannibal had to know that Will would handle it, otherwise what would Hannibal do with his dreams of making them into a family.

Unwillingly, her mind flitted over to the person Hannibal had her kill as a test of her will and mind. Nicholas Boyle hadn't plagued her in a long time, but every now and then she felt a pang knowing that he was innocent. It was one thing to logically know that a death was necessary and helped you grow, and it was something else entirely to push that thought to the forefront when she had to think deeply on that moment. It was just one of many different ones that changed her life in some way. If Randall Tier was who Abigail thought he was, Will wouldn't have to worry about his prey being secretly perfectly fine.

She smiled as her other father rode his horse back in sight. The predawn still hadn't fully settled in, which made the Exalted Plains of the Dales nearly grey, but his form still drew her eye. No matter how drab he tried to make himself, Will just stood out. When he left, there had been a lump the right shape and size to be a body on the back of the horse; it was there no longer. Abigail smirked, excited to ask Hannibal how their evening had gone once it was just the two of them again.

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Jack shouldn't have been surprised to find him. Randall Tier was parked smack in the middle of the land that belonged to Comte Hannibal Lecter and Baron Clarke Ingram. Seeing as the location meant they needed to figure out which noble they had to communicate with, both nobles were to be invited to see the display. Baron Ingram refused, still sore from earlier accusations made against his person, but Hannibal Lecter agreed to come.

If the message that Will sent earlier that morning was any indication, it was obvious why. The young man had given a brief explanation of the situation, but nothing could prepare Jack for the exact state the body was in. The mage had warned him that he had to get 'creative', but Randall Tier was utterly decimated.

Randall Tier had been dismembered, with a strange gooey substance spread between the limbs to both hold them together and put a clear separation between them. It seemed like sap, and there was something encased in it to create an illusion of longer limbs. The sap had also been used to stick fur, specifically the hide that Randall Tier had been making, to the body

itself, stuck on so that it wouldn't be removed. Part of the flesh had been flayed off and the canines had been pried from the skull and replaced with longer ones that curved over the bottom of the jaw and the top lip. Nails were ripped off and claws put in their place. The flesh of the legs and arms were cut in some places, replaced by packed earth.

The rest of the squad immediately looked to Jack upon arrival, very aware of who exactly had done the display. He said nothing. Will would be there soon, probably with Hannibal Lecter in tow, and hopefully they would never have to do something like this again. If all went well, this last death would push Hannibal into revealing something.

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Shortly after his return from disposing of Randall, the Comte received a summons from the Seekers of Truth, something that had been expected given the placement of the body. Upon his arrival with Hannibal Lecter in tow, Jimmy and Brian joined together to give Will a stern look. Brain looked meaningfully at his wrist sticking out from his sleeve, and Will noticed that a bandage was peeking out. As subtly as he could muster, the elf tugged the sleeve down and joined the rest of the group in looking at his handiwork.

"It appears that his killer chose not to dispose of the body, but instead to display it," Jack declared dryly. While Hannibal took in what was left of Randall Tier, Jack looked at him from the corner of his eye, the expression exuding his displeasure. Will understood why; his choice to make a presentation of Randall Tier made things a lot more complicated for him. Sure, Jack answered to fewer people now, but he still had to justify everything. What Will did to the corpse might look bad, would look bad, especially if they found out that a **mage** was the one to do it. The action looked nothing like blood magic, but that didn't matter to some people. Too many couldn't tell the difference or didn't care to.

"It is a jarring reminder of death's informality," Hannibal said, breaking Will out of his thoughts. He seemed, well, not happy, but pleased. It was pushed under a mask of solemnity, but Will's natural empathy and connection with the man was allowing him to understand expressions that were previously unreadable. It was strange what knowing someone would allow you to see about them.

Jack harumphed. "So he was denied a respectable end, much as he denied that to others."

His Lordship nodded regally, nose managing to stay in the air and all. "A disgrace."

No. "This isn't disdain. It's a memorial, erected to commemorate what he was in life," Will explained. It wasn't quite that in actuality, but he needed to sell it to Hannibal. It wasn't the mockery that they were claiming either though. As much as Will disliked Randall and what he did, there was a purity in his purpose that the elf himself lacked. He knew what he wanted and how to get it, even if his motivation and method were abhorrent.

Hannibal switched positions alongside him. "Our killer has no fear for the consequences of what he's done."

"No guilt," Will replied.

Jack looked to Will, and the mage avoided his face, rather than just his eyes. He knew what Jack would ask, demand really, and Will was too far in the head-space that Hannibal encouraged in him to give the High Seeker a proper answer. Later, when they were away from each other, he would be able to speak up for himself. Instead of dealing with that, he motioned for Jack and Hannibal to give him some space. He grabbed the herbs from his pouch, now ground into a fine powder since he had time to learn how to make them more potent from Brian, and washed the chalky, uncomfortable feeling out of his mouth with a gulp from his waterskin. He plopped on the ground, already feeling the exhaustion overtake him. Everyone retreated and he closed his eyes.

Normally, when Will stepped into his dreams, he was not himself when reading the spirits of a scene. He is only himself for the moment he sleeps (it was amazing that he could do it standing up now). When that happened, demons were usually waiting for him, wanting to speak and prod him for weakness or temptation. Not this time. The only thing waiting on the other side were the demons of his own making.

Randall Tier, really the facsimile the denizens of the Fade made for him, was waiting for him to arrive. He was an amalgamation of man and wolf; Will wasn't sure if this was what werewolves actually looked like, but he doubted it. Fur split the skin, too many teeth harbored in his smile. It was like the wolf was trying to burst from the scenes of the human flesh.

Will swallowed. "Hello again." Randall's lips tore his face open further, ragged bits clinging to the remains of his face as it.

"Hello yourself." The yellows eyes that Will had noticed the most about him, what brought him out of his bloodlust and allowed him to see that Randall was not Hannibal, glowed in the void that surrounded the both of them. There were a few scattered trees that gave the illusion of forest, bringing Will home, but otherwise the surrounding area was devoid of everything that would normally try to deceive him. Just Will and the demon that said, "Come closer. I want to see you."

"I think you saw me plenty earlier," Will said.

"In the throes of a vicious and passionate fight. I hardly count that as being able to see you."

Scoffing, Will said, "What about the time that you were watching me beforehand, waiting to strike."

Randall laughed. "Oh Will. I think we're both aware that I'm not actually Randall." Instead of waiting for Will to respond, the demon wearing Randall Tier's face stepped forward. "I'm wondering, I can see you. Can you see you?"

With the demon starting to encroach on Will's space, he had to keep from retreating. He stood his ground, and stopped about a foot away from him. With a swallow, Will replied, "Clearer and clearer with each passing moment."

"I don't think so." It was smirking. "This poor human is evidence of that. The way you act between your two masters is evidence of that."

Will didn't bother responding to the second query. For one, it was extremely insulting and the demon only said it to get a rise out of him. Secondly, Will wasn't sure what it meant by that. Will was perfectly genuine with Jack; sure he didn't share everything or how he was having trouble with Hannibal, but he just didn't want the High Seeker to worry. It was an act with Hannibal, it had to be. He just had to sprinkle the truth of himself in to keep the Comte from catching on. To the first claim, he said, "Randall Tier forced my hand. If I didn't kill him, he would have killed me."

It laughed, sharp and throaty,, then hissed, "But dear Will… no one forced you to enjoy it."

"He should be happy," he spat, not comfortable with how it could read him. He had spent his life trying to avoid demons and fighting them off, but it was a rare thing when one managed to get under his skin. There had been Hybris, Imshael, and now this one, a far cry from the dozens that came when he was still trying to understand what it meant to be a Somniari. A Dreamer. "Look. I gave him what he wanted."

"You called it a memorial, but that's not quite right. He's a monument now."

"He's welcome."

Its amusement was palpable, radiating in the air. "Oh it wasn't to him. It's to you. This, Will…" Sharp teeth bared and a flash of lightning under the faux skin-and-fur. "This is pride."

"It's not," Will vehemently asserted. It was desperate, even to his ears. "I gave him what he wanted, showed the Seekers who he was. The reality of what he felt is finally matched on the outside."

It shook its head. "Randall is dead, Will. Nothing matches anything. His short life was snuffed out and belonged to someone else. He longed to become a werewolf again, be himself; that's no longer an option." It stepped away from him, no longer suffocating in its presence. "I wonder what you're becoming Will."

As it was submerged in the shadow, Will forced his eyes open.

He gasped, trying to merge the lingering adrenaline and terror of the moment into his reaction to the scene. When Will looked around again, Jack, Jimmy, Brian, and Hannibal had all returned, and they were watching him, all concerned. "Are you alright?" Jimmy asked. "You were in there for a while." The elf looked around and saw that a lot of the scene had been cleaned up, even Randall's body was being removed. It couldn't have been longer than an hour, but he was only in there for thirty minutes usually.

He swallowed and tried to wet his throat. "He, um, he knew his killer. They were familiar with one another. It was someone that met him, understood him. They were like each other, the same underlying instinct." He rose to his knees and then his feet. Brian tried to help him up, but he waved the human off. His legs were shaking, but once he returned to standing, his posture evened out. Slowly, he regained his composure and put back on his shield of professional indifference.

Once he was steady, Jack asked, “Did his killer empathize with him?” It was his signal. Will hadn’t been looking at Jack this whole time, but now he was telling Will that he knew that the elf had done this.

He shook his head. “Don’t mistake empathy for understanding. I can sense…” Will glanced over at Hannibal, who was watching with disguised interest. “Envy. Envy was there, dripping from the scene.”

Jack looked immediately worried. This would be something else he would have to address with the High Seeker later, he just knew it. “Envy was there? Are you alright?”

“I have experience with demons, Jack.”

“Envy is especially rare, Will,” Jimmy mentioned and Will shot him a look. “They are usually difficult to spot and even more difficult to eradicate, seeing as they never wear their own face, they want more.”

“I’m fine,” Will said through gritted teeth. He didn’t feel comfortable telling them that he was met with Pride. At least Envy could be explained away as coming from Randall. “Look, the killer is having trouble coming into his own. He envied Randall. Wanted to be like him.”

“A fledgling. He’s never killed anyone like this.”

“Not like this,” Will agreed. He gave a parting glance at the place where Randall’s body had been, lingering on the thoughts and emotions he was leaving there.

Jack eyed Hannibal warily as the noble asked if he could speak with Will privately, but didn’t do much else. Will didn’t expect him to; if they were going to go about this the right way, Hannibal needed to feel that Will would be accessible to him until Jack started getting ‘suspicious’. Then, Will could lay the ‘murder apprentice’ bit on thicker. Hannibal collected Will on his way out (after speaking with officials privately) and the two sat inside of the carriage across from one another.

The moment was so familiar, two men riding ‘privately’ on the road across the Exalted Plains, that a thought occurred to Will. “Today’s date?” Will asked.

Looking at him curiously, Hannibal asked, “It’s the first of Parvulis. Why?”

Will scrunched up his face. “Hannibal, you don’t need to be obtuse. I’m Dalish, so I didn’t learn the calendar used by the upper class. Honestly, I only learned to use the Chantry’s calendar out of convenience. It helped when we needed to trade with humans or, as the Avvar called them, lowlanders.”

“It’s the first of Kingsway. I believe that’s the common name for the month.”

Will chuckled. “I had a feeling. It’s been so long since I bothered to check the date, that I wasn’t sure when it was coming up.”

“What?”

He smirked. “It was a year ago today that Jack Crawford first approached me and asked me to help with the Hobbs’ case.”

“Then it is a cause for celebration, although I suggest being more careful with High Seeker Crawford in the future.”

Will wasn’t quite catching on. He was still amped up on the adrenaline from successfully navigating the previous encounter, dancing around Jack and Hannibal while both Seeker-aligned men knew something that the other didn’t. Here he was, being warned by Hannibal Lecter to be wary around the man that was helping him deceive Hannibal. It was absurd. “Why?”

Hannibal’s previous amusement shifted into something dangerous. In fact, his expression was rather cross. “Jack Crawford is a smart man, and he didn’t get to be where he is today by ignoring what’s being put in front of him. Not long ago, both of us were suspected of committing crimes just like this.”

Shit. Will’s adrenaline changed into apprehension. He glanced outside at the moving hills and plains, shifting his fingers along the sill of the carriage while he collected his thoughts for the right words to say. A few of Hannibal’s looks from earlier were put into context. Yes, he was proud of what Will had done, but also seemed to believe that he had been too obvious. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, and tried to turn his contemplation into something thoughtful and not worried. “That’s why we can’t be suspects this time. Neither of us. When you framed the High Seeker, you exonerated me and yourself. He was the broom that swept our tracks.”

He was turned away so that he couldn’t see Hannibal’s expression. “I am surprised that you did not dispose of the body. It was the most prudent course of action.” The words made him tense.

“He deserved to be seen,” Will replied, sounding only slightly petulant. Randall’s parting words in his thoughts, the echoes felt in the Fade, suddenly repeated to him. *This is my becoming and yours.* “I allowed him to become what he wanted.”

“Was the display for Randall or yourself then?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t want to. Instead, Will asked, “You called it ‘artistry’. Is that how you see your own efforts?”

“I also called it ‘savagery’. You mutilated the body. Displayed it.” He had honestly thought Hannibal would be more appreciative of it.

Creators spare him; he needed to get the man off of this line of questioning. Will mutilated the body and presented it solely for the purpose of Hannibal seeing it. Right? It didn’t matter what the echoes said, it could have been a demon sent there to make Will doubt himself. They were sometimes difficult to detect. He swallowed, still steadfastly looking elsewhere, despite the gaze fixed to his back. “The bird is leaving the nest, your Lordship. Spreading his wings.”

“A newly-fledged bird is at his most vulnerable. He still relies on his parents for food, for safety and shelter. He can fly, but he has yet to learn to hunt.”

“Imitation is a powerful tool. We learn by watching and repeating until we understand our own rhythm. I’ve seen plenty, Comte Lecter.”

Hannibal touched his shoulder, but didn’t try to move Will back around. It was an acknowledgement of his presence and an impression at the same time. It was there to say ‘I am still here’ and ‘I am watching’ all at once. “How did it feel? You took what was once a living man and made him into a message of your own. Now he is one of those things that many can never ‘unsee’, lingering in the back of their thoughts on darker and quieter nights.”

Will took a deep breath, but turned it into a sigh. Better that Hannibal think him bored or weary rather than nervous. “I felt like I wasn’t finished until I stood back and looked.”

“Did you take something to keep, Will?” Hannibal inquired. He sounded amused.

Will bowed his head. “What do you think?”

“I think that sounds like something a serial murderer would do.”

Will suppressed a flinch. “One body does not make me a serial murderer.” A thicker voice, the kind one usually hears at midnight when no one else is awake, reminded him that it wasn’t just one body.

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It was night and Jack still hadn’t heard from Will. Hopefully, the elven mage was heading back to the Bastion d’Argent posthaste, eager to report his findings to Jack. He had seen the date and knew Will would probably be in a strange headspace, so he wanted to check in on him, but his knowledge of Will told him that pressuring the young man would only push him to silence. Will’s burgeoning trust was a delicate thing, and Jack wanted to earn it back. So, he didn’t send out a message trying to track Will down. If he didn’t hear anything back in the morning, he would send out after him.

In a couple of weeks, when it would be the anniversary of Garrett Hobbs’ death, it would be a completely different story. Jack wasn’t sure it would be a good idea to leave him alone at all.

Now that he had decided to leave Will, waiting up for the young man would be a waste of time. If Will needed to see him, he would contact him. So, he ventured into the room that he shared with his lovely wife, who was reading several correspondences from the Empress, brow furrowed. “My dear?” he asked, and she sighed.

“We just got news that the delegation Empress Celene sent to Kirkwall was turned away at the gates. Apparently they promised to get a more formal seal from the Empress, but while they were sailing back, the Waking Sea dragged the ship under. Her Radiance is not interested in sending someone else.” Bella put everything to the side with a dismissive semi-toss, they fell with a soft thud. “She is starting to worry that there is a Qunari plot happening

in the city-state and doesn't feel safe sending any more ambassadors. When I asked her why, she expressed concern that the ship was not sunk by nature but by spies."

Jack dressed down to his sleep clothes and joined his wife in the bed. "In a court such as Orlais's, I don't blame her. The real question is more likely whose spies sunk it." Bella gave him a playfully stern glance. "What? You know I'm right."

"Honestly I'm tired of plots." Slumping in the bed, she started to move to snuff out the candle on her side. Jack was doing the same before he heard her say, "Speaking of spies, how is Will?"

He stiffened. Honestly, Jack should have known better than to try and hide something from his wife. "He's not come back from speaking with Comte Lecter."

Bella hummed. "You might want to start discussing your plans a little further away so that I can't hear them." He had the wherewithal to look sheepish. Bella, on the other hand, made herself more comfortable as the two of them settled into bed together. She snuffed out the candle, making the room dark. They nestled together, and Jack was grateful to hear and feel the rise and fall of her chest, unsteady as it occasionally was. "Are you worried about him?"

"No," he lied. He imagined that she could hear and feel it in his heart, but, if she did, she didn't comment. "I have been worried about you though."

"I'm not," she lied back. Neither of them had the energy to call each other out on it. Peace was so hard to come by lately that breaking it apart with the truth felt disrespectful. Instead, in the warm dark, they held each other the way they hadn't managed to since before her attempted suicide.

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Riding was one of Margot's few joys anymore; she made an effort to go on a ride each morning and each evening, just to get away from the estate. Every other moment of her life was dedicated to surviving her brother in some fashion, but none of the rest of the world mattered on horseback. The only worries she had were that for herself and her horse. Bumps in the road were just that, and, while horseback riding could be dangerous, it wasn't home. In the interest of honesty, if a bandit were to happen upon her on the road, Margot would probably just promise them better treasure and take them home with her. Hopefully, her brother wouldn't buy them too.

One of the few regrets that she had was that she didn't protest more heavily when her parents refused to get her trained in actual combat. Daggers in the dark were helpful, but most young women in the Game could actually use them if it came down to a scrap. Margot was left hoping that she could stab them before they could get at her and she could find guards affiliated with her family soon after. The moment that she bounded back into the stable and dismounted her horse, swarmed by the stablehands, that regret only bounded forward. Mason was standing to the side of the entrance to the stable, dressed in a sickly yellow and twiddling something between his fingers.

His grins were always off in some manner, a little too crooked or wide. The stretch of his lips seemed like harshly pulled fabric most of the time, but they didn't now. A genuine smile from her brother, more than anything, made her sick to her stomach. "Did you have a good ride, Margot?" he asked, sounding curious. She shivered and handed the reins to the closest person before turning to her brother.

"What do you want?" she asked as he approached.

He chuckled fondly. "Now is that anyway to talk to your brother dearest?" He slunk forward, still predatory in posture. Mason slipped and hand to her cheek and gave it a patronizing pat. "I hope you don't mind my interruption, but I'd like to show you something." Then, Mason slid an arm through and around hers, effectively leading her by the elbow. Margot knew better than to try and pull away or protest, instead just letting him tug her along, careful in the heels of her riding boots so that he didn't drag her through mud and trip her.

Her brother was the hand. The threat of poverty and being a poor woman in this land? The bridle. Her knowledge that disobeying him could result in a fate worse than death? The reins.

They went to a barn, which confused her. Normally, her brother would eschew anything he considered below his station. But! Margot was nothing if not perceptive, and this structure looked new. She never went to this part of their land, so it very well could have been erected without her notice, but it was strange for him to not gloat about a personal project. "I have a surprise waiting!" he exclaimed with childlike glee, and it made her stomach turn. Whatever he was hiding in there was bound to be awful.

The barn was huge and strangely structured on the inside. There was only one set of doors, which sat immediately in front of a small set of stairs onto a raised platform. Mason led her up there, a few of his new mercenaries following closely behind them now. He was quick to point out how he furnished it. There was a table set up with enough food for two people. "Come come. I know you've been riding all morning, so you must have missed breakfast."

Margot sat and a young elven servant, roughly fourteen or fifteen, quickly began serving them. He kept at least a foot of distance between himself and Mason and minutely flinched whenever her brother moved suddenly (which was often); it immediately tipped her off that he was one of the unlucky ones. Poor boy. He was a bit older than Mason's usual tastes, but that wouldn't have made the assault any less traumatic.

Mason shook his head. "You know what, this is all wrong. Move us closer to the edge." The servant gingerly moved the table and then their chairs once they stood up from them. Upon resettling, Margot got a glimpse of what was waiting on the other side of the platform, only a foot away from her setting. "After papa died, I had an epiphany, Margot. He was a connoisseur of fine pigs, made sure that only the best were being made on our land. Other nobles would fall over themselves to get a hold of them, and he tried hard to teach me what he knew." He grinned in his too-many-teeth way with false self-deprecation. "I'll admit I wasn't the best student, but I feel like I've learned now. Only took the old man to finally kick himself into the grave. **I** wanted to see what would happen when I took all of our best and brought them together, even some from other areas of the world."

The platform, she realized, was a stage.

Below them, walls and walls ran in circles, mirrors set above them so you could see what was on the inside. Blood was staining a few of them, and it made her insides knot together. “You built a maze,” she said, tone utterly neutral. “Shudder to think.”

With the same amount of cheer that he had said every other word, Mason replied, “Your mouth gets rough when you’re afraid, Margot.” He dug into breakfast while some of the mercenaries worked behind her. Margot picked at hers, her entire body tuned to the movement behind her. She didn’t know what she would do if one of them came too close, but at least she would be ready for the inevitable. “Did you know that a pig is not like other animals? The closest thing I can compare it to is the druffalo, but it’s not quite the same. Both animals have a spark of intelligence, but only the pig has a beautiful and terrible pragmatism that the druffalo just can’t manage.”

She was stock still. The mercenaries moved from behind them, carrying a giant hunk of meat clothed in one of her better dresses. They took one of her perfumes, stolen from her room and the bottle now coated in blood from the gloves of the mercenaries, and daintily applied it to the meat. The one that had squeezed it gave her a mocking grin. Then, they toss it into the pit where the hogs went wild. Mason continued, “We clothe the meat and give it human smells so the pigs will recognize them for food. The mirrors antagonize them and make them more aggressive. The hope is that one day they’ll be able to eat someone alive instead of after they’ve killed them.”

Lightly, Margot spoke, “It was in one of my dresses.” It was purple and she could see flashes of it underneath the squirming patchy flesh of the swine.

Mason smiled and put his hand over hers, her nails were digging into her palm, still clutched around the fork. “Don’t worry! I’ll buy you a new one. It will be even better than that ratty thing.” He squeezed her hand. “It’s not just about making papa proud, Margot. It’s about us. It’s about family. I want you to be proud of me too, Margot. You’re all I have.” Mason clutched her hand so hard that it was becoming painful. “I’m all you have.”

The servant boy walked up to take their plates, but Mason’s hand shot out and grabbed his scruff as he leaned down. Then, without any sort of preamble, her brother threw the elven boy into the pit with the pigs. It wasn’t long before he started screaming, which almost covered the sound of Mason’s maniacal laughter.

“He was boring anyway, and hopefully his screams will excite them and get them used to the idea of eating someone alive.” Mason stated before finishing up his plate. One of the mercenaries went to get the other servants, but Margot couldn’t look. They were right at the edge so she could see the pigs biting at the servant, not quite eating because they weren’t there yet. That’s what Mason had intended. He had wanted her to watch.

The next couple of hours were a blur. It wasn’t until she was warm enough on the outside and inside to feel again that she became aware. Margot was shivering, which was unusual. It was also unusual for her to arrive without any real warning. Upon her arrival, the Comte had her wrapped in some lightly warmer clothing and scrounged up something hot to drink. It had a sweet blandness to it and was slightly creamy, which helped ease the tension sitting in her shoulders. It was strange to think of herself as desperate, but her careful machinations were

basically out of the window. Her brother was a better player than she had thought, and his threat had been clear.

“If you want your dignity back, you will have to kill him, Margot. You’ve known this for years.”

She stared at the ground, clutching the drink so that she still had feeling in her fingers. “It’s not dignity that I’m worried about.” Another sip and her thoughts followed the warmth all of the way down and into her stomach. “Besides, I may have missed my opportunity. Mason has hired several mercenaries with a taste for blood, and the leader has a talent for making people disappear.”

“Was that the nature of your brother’s threat?” the Comte asked, eyes glittering.

After giving a strained chuckle primarily through her nose, Margot said, “In no uncertain terms? I must behave myself or be fed to the pigs.” She nearly laughed aloud, completely and freely. It was strange how the situation amused her, but Margot knew it was more than that; if she didn’t find the absurdity of her reality a little funny, she would break apart.

“I wonder. Do you know why you failed to kill your brother?”

“Poor planning.”

“You still love him.” She snorted. “In love, you take leave of your senses, but in hatred you must be present to calculate your actions.”

Margot tried her best not to glare at her current benefactor, more than a little disbelieving of him accusing her of doing anything but loathing her brother. “I find that I am very present.”

He finally sat down across from her, his expression as closed as ever, but him coming down to her level instead of leaving her to have to look up at him did offer some comfort. “Then allow yourself to hate him.”

Silent and contemplating, Margot tried to imagine what that would look like. She wasn’t really sure that she still loved her brother after all that he had done, but then she remembered shared times in the home where they played together. The small moments where she and Mason hid from their father or played in the mud when their mother wasn’t looking. While Mason had never been a sweet boy, content to torture their servants and animals, setting clothes on fire and destroying her belongings, he had cared about her at one point. Once upon a time, they had been siblings.

“Margot.” She looked up. “Do you think that Mason will ever just give you what you want? You said it already, he enjoys what he is now too much to ever stop or try to be anything else. You will be begging him for the rest of your life.”

“I read papa’s will. Upon Mason’s passing, if there is no male heir, the estate and money will go to the chevaliers as a way of contributing to the organization. He wanted to make sure that if I ever wanted anything, I needed to marry or have a child for it.”

Hannibal nodded. “Even if he were to die, he would take anything from you.” They sat in silence. “Your father’s will keeps you from living your life, your mother’s existence keeps you from altering the will before a court, and your brother’s existence is the only reason you get anything, but you have to change yourself to suit his whim. You stand in the shadow of your family’s legacy, especially here in Orlais. It is the ability to make a legacy that keeps your name alive and secures power for you to live in safety and comfort.”

“I don’t get a legacy. I only get to try and survive my family’s.”

“Unless you make one for yourself.”

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Will tossed back another shot of whiskey, not looking forward to this. Freddie Lounds, the Red Tattler, had requested a chance to speak with him and Will had reluctantly agreed. He did, after all, owe her several meetings. His conversation with her prior to Matthieu Marron had not been forgotten. While she hadn’t had a chance to get back into the Bastion since (she claimed that she was ‘busy’), Freddie had declared now as good a time as any. “It’s been exactly a month since our deal was made; high time we try actually going through with some of it.”

It had been a month. It was strange to think that a month ago he had been in the dungeons. Even stranger to realize that it was a month ago that he had sent a killer after Hannibal hoping that one of them would kill the other. Simultaneously, it felt like a month was far too short and far too long of a period of time. It still felt like it was yesterday that he had made the request. It also felt like it had been another lifetime. That moment was the birth of this person and everything since was the ‘after’, expanding backwards and forwards of that single point in time.

She was busy setting up a station for her to take notes on their conversation, which made him anxious. The bard was writing about him and his story; he knew what they were for. Will also went over everything he had talked about with Jack. He couldn’t actually tell her the truth about some things, lest the both of them seem suspicious. Freddie Lounds was a bard, first and foremost, and an unorthodox one that was perfectly willing to spread gossip and secrets about anyone for anyone. Getting a scoop on the Seekers of Truth would make every person in the capital swoon for her, praising her for pointing out more secrecy among Chantry aligned organizations. Will wasn’t sure that gold would keep her from it; she would get far more from the nobles that would like to see the Chantry dragged down.

“Once I slipped to my publisher that I would be writing a story about you with information coming directly from the source, he was practically salivating. At least three noble families agreed to sponsor me so that I could afford to get even more information.” Freddie raised an eyebrow. “I would pay you if you’re willing to work beyond today for our arrangement.”

Will frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

She rolled her eyes. “One just wants you to spill the juicy details of your relationships, especially the one with Comte Lecter. I’m perfectly willing to embellish, but I think quoting you might be more interesting.”

If it was possible he frowned even more. “Not interested.”

“Your loss.” The bard sighed and shrugged. “The other two gave me trinkets from their enemies, which were beyond the scope of our agreed upon three. They decided that since I was working with a Somniari, I could use your talents.”

Will did not like that at all. He wasn’t some sort of device that you put a trinket in and got back information. Nevertheless, if he did want to leave the Seekers of Truth eventually, he would need something to keep him afloat. The first time he went into the wilderness on his own, he only managed to survive because the Avvar found him. He had earned gold while among them so that he could buy supplies when he went on the road to help supplement what he could gather. Jack had alluded to giving him something for the road, but a cushion was always nice. “I’ll think about it.” Freddie smirked, because she knew that she had him; Will hated it.

“We can always discuss that more later. For now, let’s attend to the business that I’m primarily here for.” She sat back and got comfortable in the chair that Jack provided for them. They were in Will’s quarters, which would have made him feel awkward if he was actually sleeping in them. For now, he just sat cross-legged on the bed and took another swig of whiskey. “Let’s talk about the Highwayman, your jailer and savior. Frederick Chilton. Who knew?” Her last comment was posed more as a statement than a question, clearly showing that she didn't actually believe it.

“Who knew,” he echoed back.

“No one did and nobody would. Not even you for all of the help spirits give you and your natural empathy.” She flicked something off of her clothing. “You were so certain that Hannibal Lecter was he that you tried to kill him.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “You neglected to say allegedly.”

“No. I didn’t.” The ginger smirked. “I heard that you and Hannibal Lecter are all buddy-buddy again. What’s up with that?”

He knew it was coming. “I was wrong about him,” he sighed out, hoping it sounded believable. “That’s what’s up with that.”

“Maybe you were. Maybe you weren’t.”

“Frederick Chilton was the Highwayman.”

“Frederick Chilton wielded a halberd and was known to be terrible in close combat when it came to knives and fists. Halberds are messy and lack any of the precision found in the Highwayman kills. Furthermore, he has largely been stationary for the last several years while the deaths attributed to the Highwayman are along, you guessed it, the Imperial Highway.” She leaned down to pick up a document from her bag. “I also have several itineraries from Kingsway through Harvestmere that suggest he was mostly at the Bastion d’Argent and not in Red Crossing where the first copy murders, now attributed to the Highwayman, took place. There’s no way that he could have been in two places at once.”

He considered it, for a moment, either telling her to fuck off or telling her the truth, Jack be damned. If she found this out on her own, it could be a problem, and at least it would hurt Hannibal as well. There was a large 'but' hanging there though; while there was a possibility that she could be a help more than a hindrance, for the moment it was unlikely. Ultimately, the fewer people he involved, the better. "My story with the Highwayman already has an ending, Freddie."

"Mine doesn't," she growled, and the vehemence of it surprised him. "Do you really think that former High Seeker Chilton could have killed Abigail Hobbs?" He didn't say anything. "I don't. Even if I let this go, I'll never let that go."

His expression darkened, the reminder of why he was going after Hannibal renewing some of his anger. He had been so lost lately, allowing himself to be drawn in by what Hannibal was doing for him and the weird knowledge that the noble cared for him in a fucked up way. It wasn't the hate that he wanted, but it did allow him to remember that feeling that had led him to this path in the first place. "Trust me, Freddie. Neither will I."

Freddie stared at him for a moment before abruptly closing her book. "I believe I need a break. If you'll allow me a moment to freshen up, then I'll come back and we'll continue." Will gave her directions to the nearest place for her to do that in the Bastion and took a moment to collect himself. He sent a swift prayer to the Creators for the safety of Abigail's soul in the Fade, hoping that her status as his adopted daughter would allow her their protection, and prepared for the Red Tattler to return.

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Will had taken to the habit of letting Hannibal know the location of his camping spots, claiming that somebody ought to be able to give Jack the information should he go missing. When Hannibal had asked why not just tell Jack, the elf had replied that it wasn't about Jack. Abigail could understand the sentiment of wanting some freedom from the people that held you captive. There was a relief in the knowledge that if she chose to go, you couldn't be found. What was confusing her now was the fact that Hannibal had left the information lying about in his study while there was just Margot Verger in the room. From her hiding spot, Abigail managed to see that the noble lady did locate the information and secret it away. It was something that Hannibal hadn't done before and it wasn't like him to be careless, which meant that he must have done it on purpose.

"Why did you let Lady Verger know where Will was going to be tonight?" she asked him while he was trying to teach her to play the harpsichord. He quickly finished the bar and then turned to her.

"I thought it would be prudent for her to know."

Abigail narrowed her eyes, trying to suss out exactly what Hannibal meant by that. Trying to understand what he meant when he was talking about other people had become a game of hers. He was continuous referring to others (both with and without them there) in vague terms that sometimes only meant something to him. She had know clue why it would be prudent for Lady Verger to know where Will was. "Prudent?" she eventually asked.

He was amused by her curiosity; he always was. Sometimes he told her that it reminded him of who he was when he was younger. Then, he told her that it reminded him of Will, and that made her infinitely happier. “Sometimes, you need to direct people where they need to go to get the result that benefits you best.” Hannibal gestured to the sheet music that he had been playing for her. “When we compose, we put the notes together so that they form a melody. They have to be in just the right place to create something beautiful. If they are not properly placed, the music fails.

“But people aren’t notes.”

“People are infinitely more complex,” Hannibal agreed. “Yet we still need to make sure they are in their right place if we want to create a masterpiece.”

He did this sometimes: talk about people as if they were tools. It often made Abigail uncomfortable, sometimes even made her question their relationship. It was silly. Hannibal cared about her; it was supposed to end with just the three of them. He even told her that he often considered her his daughter and went through this whole process just to release her of Garrett Hobbs. Furthermore, he’s teaching her his ways so that she can survive in the world without he and Will someday. There’s no way he would do something like that to her.

To Will, on the other hand. That was a different story. Hannibal told her that Will wasn’t by his side yet, which could mean that he might do something to pull Will there. While Abigail would love for Will to join them sooner rather than later, their night time dream sharing often left her with the impression that nothing would upset Will more than having his agency taken away from him. He prided himself on being a dreamer and having survived this long with his mind more or less intact. Georgia had told her that Somniari are more sensitive to demons, they draw them like moths to a flame. It was one of the reasons that Georgia had asked to become Tranquil; she claimed that she was tired of hearing the voices whispering to her every night, stronger than the ones that other people apparently heard. The older she got, the more often she heard them. She even told Abigail that sometimes dreamers could hear them in the day. Their minds would wander off, almost as if they were asleep and awake at the same time, and the voices of spirits and demons would draw them in. Sometimes, when a call was too strong, the dreamer would fall asleep wherever they were and the people around them would have trouble getting up. It sounded terrifying.

It also helped Abigail understand why what Hannibal had done to Will would be considered so much of a violation. “You’re just trying to influence Margot, right? You’re not going to hurt Will.”

Hannibal actually seemed offended. “Of course not!”

“I just know that he values being his own person and what we did to him would have really hurt him. I don’t want him to be hurt again.”

“My dear,” Hannibal said and kissed her forehead. “I care far too much about Will to try and take away his autonomy. Will has and always will be more interesting as his own person.” He looked back to the sheet music and shifted the pages so that it was back to the beginning of the song. “Now come and show me what you’ve learned. Don’t worry, I’ll turn the pages for you.”

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A horse rode by his camp before stopping. A well-dressed rider got off and then made her way towards him.

“I don’t suppose this time we meet that it was an accident?” Will asked as Margot Verger came into the candlelight. Her dress was disconcerting as it was strangely fine for riding off in the middle of the night. The closer she got, the more he could see, and it became apparent that she was in her night clothes. Creators, she must have been freezing. The autumn night was definitely more frigid than usual. Furthermore, she was bare-faced, mask nowhere in sight.

“Hardly,” she said with a smile and held out a bottle of whiskey, clutching some sort of sleep robe around her.

He took the peace offering with a smile. “At least this time you didn’t run over me with your horse.”

“The night is still young,” she said with a smile. “Do you mind if I join you by your fire?”

“Be my guest,” he replied and gestured towards a soft looking patch of earth across from him. Instead, Lady Margot Verger sat down next to him, close enough that her leg was touching his. They sat in silence for a moment, before he poured them both some of the drink in tin cups so that they could have another thing keeping them warm.

She stared at it for a moment, then muttered, “Reasoning makes us people, but questioning the nature of our humanity makes us miserable.”

He grinned, entertained by the truth of the notion as depressing as it was. “I’ll drink to that.” Then, he knocked by the cup and poured himself more. “I feel I must reiterate my earlier question. Why exactly are you here?”

Grinning, Margot said, “You didn’t ask that.”

“I did, just not in so many words.”

She drank as well and gathered her thoughts. “I’m surprised they let you sleep outside of the Bastion, what with you being a mage and all.”

“I’m friends with the High Seeker and he feels just guilty enough to allow me some freedom.”

She hummed and swallowed another gulp of whiskey. It was probably expensive and should have been drunk with more care, but neither of them were in the mood to savor it. Perhaps another time. Will was still hung up on the fact that she hadn’t answered his question. “You spent a while in captivity.”

“I did.”

“You understand then. You understand what it’s like when someone takes your freedom, your identity away from you.”

Slowly, he turned his head to stare at her. “I do. You do as well?”

Nodding, she gave a wobbly smile. “I’m riddled with scars from it. I thought I could escape its haunting shadow, but it’s stuck to my skin. That’s why you’re out here? Taking your chance to remove yourself from its source. I wish I could.”

“Margot-”

“Are you scarred?” she asked.

He looked at her sadly. “More than I probably know.”

Margot gave a slow look towards his tent, already set up so that he wouldn’t have to attempt it in the dark. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

He returned her look with a blink. “Margot, I know what you meant when you said you aren’t interested in giving your family an heir. I’ve heard some rumors myself. I’m pretty sure I don’t have what you’re looking for.”

“It’s not about that. It’s about trust.”

Scoffing, Will replied, “It’s good to trust, but better not to. I’ve learned that the hard way.”

“My optimal level of trust is zero usually, but I trust you.”

So many red flags went off in his head. “I don’t trust you.”

She frowned. “I don’t need you to trust me.”

“What **do** you need?" he asked, growled really. She reached for her night shirt and began to unbutton it, but he grabbed her hands. Unfortunately, it was undone just enough to show the lines going down her shoulders, soldered into her skin. She hadn’t been kidding when she said she had scars. “Who did that to you?”

“My brother,” she sighed out. He gently brushed his finger over it, before buttoning her shirt back up in a perfunctory fashion. “Margot. I can’t give you what you want.”

“You can’t?” she raised an eyebrow.

“You want an heir, right? You mentioned it during our first conversation, and you already established that you aren’t attracted to men. How did you find me?”

Margot shuddered and Will allowed her to huddle against him, but kept a close watch on her hands. “Comte Hannibal Lecter left your location out, presumably for me to find.” He cursed. “My brother threatened me. I need insurance so that I can kill him without losing everything.”

“You were desperate, but you didn’t think this through, Margot. What do you think would happen if you were to suddenly get pregnant? Your brother wouldn’t leave you alone, and I doubt he would let you keep the baby. Furthermore, you nobles are all about legitimacy. I doubt anyone would accept your child as an heir without proof of a noble father.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like bastards don’t become nobles on a regular basis. It just requires someone actually agreeing that the child is theirs and giving them that legitimacy. Furthermore, there are people that are good at forging documents for bloodlines, especially if it comes from one that’s long died out. The Court rarely cares about it that much.”

“My final question: what do you think would happen if people found out where they came from?”

She stiffened against him. “Half-elves don’t look elven. They look human.”

“Not entirely,” he pointed out. “They look just human enough to pass, but a trained observer might see otherwise. A half-elf as a noble? Not only would their position be immediately revoked and your house destroyed, but there’s a very good chance that they would be executed too. Not to mention that this child could have magic, it tends to run stronger in bloodlines. If they were to present as a mage, then you would have to give them to a Circle and they would lose any right to be an heir anyway. Would you hide them? Have them spend their whole life aggressively controlling themselves without any form of education? ”

“I-I didn’t know.”

“And now you do. Look, I’m not going to abandon you with this. I don’t like seeing someone hurt, especially by someone that they’re supposed to trust.” She looked up at him, eyes watery and hurt, but still hopeful. “I’ll see if I can help you get rid of your brother somehow.”

“If he dies without a male heir, then I lose everything. It doesn’t matter if he hurts me now. I can last a little bit longer if it means that his death won’t ruin the rest of my life.”

He patted her shoulder. “We’ll figure something out. I know a decent forger.” She smiled and looked towards the tent. “I’m not having sex with you.”

“And I’m not planning to have sex with you anymore. I am, however, very tired and would like to sleep.” He laughed, and the two of them retired, confused but happy. There was a strange camaraderie in the air, knowing that there was someone out there that understood your situation and was also trying to actively fight back. He had felt protective of Peter, but Margot seemed to share his lacking innocence and strong survival instinct. It wasn’t just about understanding a person’s situation, but each other as well. It was an odd start to a friendship and there was almost no trust between the two of them, but that appreciation and acknowledgement was enough for now.

Will’s dreams were always fragile and, tucked against Margot in a strange embrace, they seemed even more volatile tonight. The night was alien, and there was something about Margot’s desire to have a legacy to shape her future that had stuck with him and followed him into his dreams. He had a legacy of sorts once. For a while, he had accepted the fact that Abigail Hobbs may be human, but there was still a lot that he could teach her. He had shared

his culture with her, both the Avvar and the small pieces from the Dalish that he was comfortable with.

He dreamed that he was in the same place he started. Instead of his usual spot in Red Crossing, Will was with his Clan. While they primarily roamed the Free Marches, once every decade their Keeper made it a point to cross the Waking Sea, cross the majority of Orlais, and spend a month in the Dales. Keeper Deshanna Istimaethoriel claimed it was their duty to go, in remembrance of their fallen ancestors that had called the land home.

Will absently recognized this time period as the last days that he spent with the Clan. He was a teenager verging on adulthood and the Keeper's First, so he often felt like the adult he was not. Often, he ended up minding the Second and the other children of the Clan for the real adults, watching as they set up the camp for the month. Will knew that in a few days he would be receiving his vallaslin, marking him as an adult in the eyes of his people. His connection with spirits scared many of his Clan, but not the Keeper. She would mark him with the symbols of Dirthamen, Keeper of Secrets and Knowledge, and he would wear them with pride.

By the end of the month, he would no longer be a part of the Clan. While he left willingly, he was only spurred by the fact that many of them didn't want him there.

His eyes strayed to the little girl that would be the cause of his departure. Her name was Arvani, and only a week after he received the vallaslin, she would show signs of magic. The hahren would fret, she was only four, and tradition would dictate that as the third mage, if they didn't find another Clan willing to take her, they would have to give her a pack and leave her in the woods. Will knew a few Clans did not practice this tradition, but the Free Marches and Orlais had Templars that were stricter than most. Usually the Clans that managed to get away with it were from Fereldan, Rivain, and Antiva, even Nevarra. Those were the places where mages were hunted with less rigor. No Clans would be around that could take her and the Arlathvhen wouldn't occur for years to properly trade her. The other mage in the Clan was twelve, also not in a place to go off on their own. To save her from almost certain death, Will would leave a week after with the pack that would have been meant for her. No one would try and make him stay, not even Keeper Deshanna.

A voice came from behind him. "Will?" He turned and saw Abigail, who laughed upon seeing him. She was so genuinely delighted that it startled him. "Maker, you look to be my age." He glanced down and saw that he had lost some muscle mass and more than a few scars. He raised a hand to his face, feeling none of the stubble that he had carefully cultivated. It took a long time for elves to grow facial hair. "They aren't there," Abigail stated. "Your face is as fresh and blank as a baby's." It took a moment for him to realize that she had meant his tattoos. The human girl looked out to the camp, watching the bustle. "So this is what a Dalish camp looks like?"

He smiled. "Yes. This was my home until shortly after I became an adult."

Her nose scrunched up. "How shortly after?"

Shrugging, he replied, "A couple of weeks. This is actually very close to the time when I left."

“You left?” she asked, not comprehending why he would. “Why would you leave? This place seems so comfortable and homey. Everyone is working together, nobody is trying to compete or be wealthier or better than anyone else. It seems… happy.” It struck Will that Abigail had grown up among humans, who generally didn’t have the same sense of community. There was a divide between city elves and Dalish elves, but that largely depended on the city and the Clan. Lavellan was infinitely more hospitable to city elves than, say, Virnehn, who would occasionally kill them on sight for ‘giving in to the humans’. Clan culture often required the elves to live hand-to-mouth, constantly roaming. Wealth wasn’t for the individual when every person was struggling to survive.

Still, the truth remained. “Maybe the Clan itself was, but I wasn’t welcome here. I left because I knew that and because a little girl would probably have died if I hadn’t.” He gestured to Arvani, who was playing with the other children and jumping off of one of the aravels. “In a weird way, she was a piece of me left there. A last act that cemented who I was to them.” His legacy. It was something he had never thought about before. For the rest of her life, Arvani would contend with the fact that he saved her life. “After that, I left my name behind. I wasn’t Clan anymore and it wouldn’t feel right to keep it.”

“I used to feel like I was what was left of Garrett Hobbs in the world,” Abigail said. “His last act was trying to kill me. I don’t think I feel that way anymore; I feel like I shed him like a snake sheds skin. Sometimes, though, I remember that my life was forever changed because of him. I am still his legacy, no matter what I do to escape it.”

“Was,” Will said bitterly. Abigail frowned. “You were his legacy. Not anymore. I wish you could have been mine. There was so much that I wanted to teach you, but something held me back. Now I wish I had tossed it away.”

Abigail opened her mouth, like she wanted to say something, then paused. Instead, she exhaled slowly through her nose, and turned to watch Arvani. They both did and sat in silence for the rest of the dream.

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It was the morning after. The night had made her vulnerable, her conversation with Will flaying bits of her open. They had rested against each other, feeling joined by their position of powerlessness. The breakfast they had was an awkward affair, if only because of how comfortable they felt with each other. There was a sense that trying to confront their camaraderie would break it apart, and, while Margot couldn’t speak for Will, she knew that she wanted to hold on to it for as long as the moment lasted. Regardless of their hopes, the moment did have to break. Once breakfast was over, she dressed as nightly as she could and got herself ready with her night bag left on the horse and a skin of water. Will helped her braid glass beads into her hair so that she looked like she hadn’t slept in a tent and she fixed her mask onto her face. She left not long after.

Her brother was going to be angry when she returned to the estate, and Margot knew it was likely that she would regret it. At this point, the damage had been done. Seeing as she was not likely to get a worse punishment by staying out a few more hours, Margot decided to return to Hannibal Lecter. She had a few things she needed to say.

“I had sex with Will,” were the words she greeted him with. She hoped that she could trigger something, a flicker of anything. At this point, her prodding was more for Will’s sake than hers. If the Comte hadn’t committed to anything yet, then he wasn’t likely to. “How does that make you feel?”

He blinked. “I’ll admit that I find it curious. Will is not a lesbian.”

She smirked, humored. “He sure made a go at it.”

“Was he aware of your intention to get pregnant?”

“Wasn’t it your intention for me to get pregnant?” she confronted him with. His goading had led her to that conclusion, and she was sure that, for some reason, he wanted her to pursue having a child. Neither of them spoke until she relented. “We didn’t actually have sex. Instead, we had a long talk about how it would be a bad idea for me to become pregnant with his child.”

Hannibal… did deflate slightly. Margot wasn’t sure how to process that. Was he relieved or regretful? He said, “I understand why he would feel that way, and why you would go out of your way to attempt to have a child. I’m afraid I can’t help you with that matter.” he patted her hand gently, barely touching her. “Your life’s been threatened. We experience a greater desire to remain in this world through our actions and deeds when reminded of death, and nothing stays longer or has a greater impact than our children.”

“So you’re saying that the more we think about dying, the more we focus on what matters?” she asked, just barely refraining from rolling her eyes.

“You came here to tell me that you had slept with Will but had not. You also seem to be trying to confront me about my part in it, when we both know that you can make your own decisions. You could just leave your brother.”

She interrupted, “He would only hunt me down.”

“He could also run himself into the ground trying to do so. If you got far away enough and found somewhere quiet, he would never find you. What I want to know is what does matter to you Margot. You’ve fought your brother for so long when you didn’t need to.”

She took a moment to think about it, truly think about it. The problem was that his Lordship was right. Yes, her life would be miserable for a few years while her brother had her hunted, but once he got tired of it and she was suitably settled, things would be peaceful. As a commoner, no one gave a shit who you married and spent your life with; no one bothered with bloodlines and legitimacy. Sure, someone probably did, but the point was largely that a family was a family. Love was love. Margot had been perfectly willing to play the game, should she have to, even have an heir, but she wasn’t going to force herself to be something she wasn’t.

Then there was the matter of the heir itself. A child. Speaking with the Comte had prompted her to think about her legacy and what it meant for her. The Verger family name was dirt in her eyes, but she knew that her great-grandparents had been heroes, her ancestors had built

their family from the ground up and fought for every single title. While her parents were awful and her grandparents absent, Margot still had others to think about. They had built up a name and a legacy for themselves and her brother would squander it. He would spend the rest of his days wasting their wealth on pet projects, making too many enemies, and his last breath would probably be saying something pointlessly cruel. Her parents made a to-do about her not being willing to marry, but it was even more unlikely that Mason would.

“In a strange way, I suppose I do want to be a part of the family, just not my immediate one. The Vergers have created something, and, with Mason in charge, it will be gone in less than a decade. I do want a child if only to carry on the name, and put a bit of myself in the world. You were right about that. It would be nice… to have a small part of me untouched by Mason, able to get away from him.”

Hannibal smiled. Genuinely smiled. “Much of what men do can be attributed to a desperate need to immortalize themselves. Women, however, can take a more direct route and create new life.”

Chuckling, she agreed. “It’s one way to shape a legacy.”

“And one way to get what you need and take everything back. You require an heir, Margot. You should think about acquiring one. If you were to have a boy…”

Her thoughts sharpened. “Then I could kill Mason.”

“I know you would. I like that about you.” His amusement was clawed and fanged. “You’re much more interesting and capable than your brother. It’s a catharsis that I do recommend.”

A knock on the door came and a servant apologized as they came in the room. “I’m sorry, your Lordship. You have a visitor.”

“Might you take a name? I already am entertaining one now, and it would be terribly impolite to dismiss her for another.”

“It’s Marquis Verger, your Lordship. He says he has come to retrieve his sister.”

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Margot immediately turned to him helplessly, which answered the question he had been planning on asking. If Hannibal had any doubts about Margot’s sincerity when it came to her relationship with her brother, they were scattered now. Her sheer shock and terror told him that she hadn’t known that Mason knew where she was nor that he would come for her. It also told him that she really had been meeting with him in secret. Knowing all of these things while a banal and cruel man was waiting on his doorstep shifted his line of thinking. He didn’t particularly believe that he needed to move too carefully, but he should not bring undue attention to Margot. She had a decent chance for being far better entertainment than her brother.

He sighed. “Allow him in.” The Lady Verger stared at him. “I will handle this, Margot. Just try and wait out his wrath. You’ll be able to get what you want.” He watched as her posture

and what was visible of her face even out into stone. A quick glance confirmed that her knuckles had gone completely white, and she was likely drawing blood from her palms with how hard she was clenching her fists.

The man walked into his study as if it was his own. He wore a tackily ostentatious outfit, even for Orlais, in a strange off-white color. Somehow, it had managed to stay clean. He stroud in, extending his arms wide with a smile just as large. “Comte Lecter! It’s so very nice to meet you.” Margot’s brother gave a small bow, eyes managing to be just as manic as his personality. “I am Marquis Mason Verger. Thank you for allowing me into your fine home.”

“How could I refuse?” Hannibal coolly responded.

Mason cheerily added, “It **would** have been impolite. I heard that Margot has been visiting you fairly frequently. I thought it prudent as her brother and the head of the estate to come and check your intentions.”

A quick nod. “I do enjoy putting a face to the name.”

Mason continued to smile, even as an undertone of menace spread in his eyes. “Margot, dear. I would like to speak to the Comte in private.” She stood instantly and brusquely walked to the door. “The carriage, Margot. It’s right outside.” She stopped at the door, shooting a quick worried glance, then stepped out without further fanfare. “Do you have a sister, Comte Lecter?”

“I had one.”

“Then you understand my predicament. My parents didn’t appreciate Margot’s propensity towards women. After papa died, my mother went to an estate by Lake Celestine for her own health, leaving it to just the two of us. I’m all she has anymore and she’s all I have.” He sighed, seemingly put upon. “You must understand my need to protect Margot. Mostly from herself. She doesn’t appreciate my care and has always been pathological.” Mason huffed slightly and then sat on the arm of a chair, putting all of the dramatics possible into the movement. “I’m sure she’s told you about all of the horrible things that I’ve done. She always has distorted reality to maximize her martyrdom.”

A brother treating his sister in such a manner? Deplorable. The thin ice that Mason Verger had been standing on when speaking with Hannibal cracked and broke beneath him. Not that the man noticed. Hannibal pretended to look considerate. “A charade for her resentments.”

The Marquis sighed. “I have always been the favorite even before Margot expressed her sexual leanings. Something must have snapped because all of that hate bubbled up. She even tried to kill me! Her own brother! All I have done is love her and that was my thanks.” He threw his hands up in the air. “I suppose I should thank you for entertaining her, but I wouldn’t recommend believing or enabling her fantasies. It’ll only make her worse.”

“She simply wanted a friend. To get out of the house more and broaden her horizons,” Hannibal replied coolly.

“Friends, huh?” Mason asked. “What sort of friends?”

“The sort you talk to,” Hannibal said with a smile. “Do you have any of those, Mason?”

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“I need to talk to you!” Jack heard from the other side of the courtyard. It was midday at the Bastion and the novices were rushing to their drills with one of the older Senior Seekers. The bustle was heartening and seeing so many minds coming together to train and be the next generation of Seekers always brightened his mood. He turned to the voice, ready to answer a question for an eager new recruit, but the face he saw destroyed the effects that the sunlight and young people had on his day. Freddie Lounds was jogging across the courtyard, a red and grey eyesore, and, once again, not where she should be.

“Madame Lounds,” Jack drawled. “As the High Seeker, I am supposed to approve every person that comes and goes from this place. I distinctly do not remember giving you authorization to be here.

She came to a stop in front of him, fixing her fox mask back into place. Her wild curls were flung behind her in the wind, bouncing with every gust. It somehow managed to give her a playful air, even if ‘playful’ was far from a word that he would associate with her. Jack’s second thought was to glance around the yard for Will and make sure to keep the two of them far away from each other. He didn’t see the elf, which was a good first step.

She took in his wandering eyes and said, “Don’t worry. We’ve already run into each other. Had our spat right in the hall near the armory. I’m only here because he owed me a few favors.”

“What is your business with me then?” Jack rolled his eyes, trying to use his larger presence and body to warn her away. She didn’t seem to be intimidated, just as well. He would just get her kicked out momentarily.

“I’m just curious why the elf mage who was previously suspected for several murders is allowed to go out of the Bastion at night and wander the Exalted Plains. Furthermore, I’m curious why he repeatedly left unsupervised with the man he tried to kill and accused of being the Highwayman.”

Jack was careful to allow no reaction to show on his face. “Are you now?

She smirked. “I’m honestly surprised that you can’t see it. At this point, I’m wondering what Will is doing in bed with Hannibal Lecter, but I don’t suppose you’re there yet.” Jack just frowned. Freddie was trying to bait him, but he wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. “You’re feeling guilty,” she breathed out, her grin bisecting her face. “Poor Seeker Crawford was wrong the first time, and he doesn’t want to be wrong the second.”

“Freddie,” he growled in warning.

“You’re blinding yourself purposefully,” she spat. “You can’t even see it.

He bit out, “See what?”

“That Will was right about Lecter, and I was right about Will.”

He snarled. “I’m not about to have this or any conversation with you, Tattler.” He pulled his hand up and signaled for the nearest couple of Seekers to come over. He was going to have her escorted out of the building. She was making far too many insinuations for his liking and if she spread that noise around for much longer it could severely hurt their operations.

“You know I’m right!” she called out. “Will’s finally learned that if you can’t beat the Comte, you need to join him. You better watch him, Crawford. He’ll take you down a path that you don’t want to go!”

Jack sighed. Now he needed to talk with Will about what they were going to do with Freddie.

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Hannibal had made sure that they were enjoying a bounty, one that was visibly not made of people, which Will was grateful for. He knew that Hannibal was making sure not to put people in front of him as some sort of peace offering, but that had never been stated directly. Every meal that contained the subtle reassurance made him feel a bit better. Jack eyed him from across the table, both of them not sure what to say while their host effused the praises of this particular specimen, apparently an offering from Marquis Verger himself. The elf had almost spat out the pork once he heard the name, but the self-satisfied smile that Hannibal had graced him with helped him keep his composure and swallow it down. Even when trying to ‘compromise’, Hannibal found a way to keep himself amused.

He sat down and took his own portion. “It’s always nice to receive a gift from a friend.”

“Your friend, not the pig’s,” Will said into his wine glass. Hannibal’s smile became more visible, and it only served to confuse Will. It was genuine, but as far as he was aware Hannibal didn’t tolerate rudeness. Yet, here he was, amused at Will’s snide remark.

The Comte nodded. “There are those that raise livestock who have a genuine affection for their charges. The farmer who hand-reared his lambs loved them and then sent them to slaughter.”

Jack glanced his way with a knowing look. “They love and kill what they love.” Was he trying to warn Will? He needn’t bother; Will was very aware what kind of person Hannibal was, even intimately so. He had to be.

“A paradox.”

The two guests glanced each other’s way, and Jack put the new phase of the plan into motion. “I received a message from Freddie Lounds today. She went out of her way to inform me that she believes the two of you are a paradox.” He took a bite, feigning nonchalance. “She sees something no one else does.”

Will played dumb. “And that would be?” he asked, guiding the conversation before Hannibal could try.

Jack gave a small laugh, trying to play it off like his next comment would be absurd. “She seems to think that neither of you is the killer she’s writing about, but together, you might be.”

Hannibal’s lips dropped just an increment. He turned to Will, something predatory swimming in his eyes. “Freddie Lounds must consider you a bland subject if she’s already resorted to fiction.”

“Freddie Lounds has gained a reputation for being a large source of gossip for the capital,” Jack reminded them. “No one is accusing her of being restrained by the truth, but enough people take her at her word to be a problem, if only for their own entertainment. She has no boundaries.”

Will gave a nervous swallow. This would be a part he would have to play well if Hannibal was going to be convinced of his allegiance. So much of his dialogue with Hannibal had skirted truths and falsehoods, flirting with both enough that they could be one or the other. Most of the time he ended up being slightly dishonest to keep the other man interested, a kernel of truth always lying beneath, above, and around it. He spoke his line, “A person with no boundaries is an abomination.” A smile, carefully stretched to the right length. “Or a bard.”

“You both don’t seem to have any boundaries either,” Jack replied, masking any hesitance behind food, an excuse Hannibal would easily buy. If only Will had given himself a reputation for being a big eater, he might have been able to disguise anxiety just as well. “Once, you were sponsor and protege. Noble and elf. Mundane and mage. Enemies even. Now you seem to have returned to where you began. Will has even stayed here a few times without my supervision.” Will looked away, trying to seem caught up in the moment and startled by Jack’s insight. “After all that’s happened, it’s difficult to tell what you are to each other.”

Hannibal didn’t say anything, and instead watched Will for his response. Two pairs of eyes staring at him, both waiting for his reaction. Will knew that he would have to create a barrier between Jack and him. Something had to assure Hannibal that it was the two of them versus everyone else. “We know where we are with each other. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

Hannibal looked away and precariously balanced a slice of meat on his fork. “Better the demon you know.”

Will bid Hannibal farewell after the meal, long after Jack supposedly left. The night had been intimate and uncomfortable in equal bounds. Will wasn’t sure what to make of Hannibal’s joy at trading small jokes across the table, and, for the first time, he felt a small twinge at tricking him. Still, this was going where it needed to. Will had to get retribution, for Abigail, for Beverly, for Hannibal’s multitude of victims.

For himself.

So, Will met Jack at the nearest tavern. If this all went according to plan, tomorrow they would have Freddie at a safe house and Will would be one step further into Hannibal’s good graces. It would have to be executed with Freddie’s cooperation and largely relied on her

agreeing to meet him in the middle of nowhere, but if she did refuse his invitation, at least Will tried to save her life. When he arrived, Jack greeted Will and gestured for him to join the Seeker at a private table.

The serving girl gave him the eye as she came over, so Will openly scowled. Before she could say anything, Jack glared her off, simply placing coin on the table and she exchanged it for a couple of ales. Will sipped at it, while Jack chugged at his drink. They sat in silence, Will trying to calm himself and sort through his strange and strung out emotions.

"So it begins," Jack said. "You sent the invitation to Freddie?" Will nodded. "Good. Hopefully, our plan will work. She's practical, even by bard standards. She'll see this as an opportunity first and use it as a way to get favors from the Seekers of Truth."

"And a way to stay alive," Will muttered, taking another sip. "It's important that Hannibal doesn't get to her first."

Jack clapped his shoulder. "Don't worry Will. By the end of this we'll have an ally among the bards, and another person saved from Hannibal."

He huffed. "It is a good thing that she decided to approach you first. Her luck that you were in the know and could fold her into our conspiracy. If she had spoken to an ally of Hannibal's, she'd be dead. If she had spoken with somebody else among the Seekers, we might be in trouble."

"Freddie is lucky indeed."

The length of time that it actually took Freddie to bite actually surprised Will. He had sent her a blanket invitation to stop by a place that Jack had helped him set up in the middle of nowhere. The hope was for them to have a home base where Will could stay, and also where he would be able to store anything suspect in relation to Hannibal. It was an old, abandoned farmhouse that Jack had purchased after Randall had attacked him. They were still in the process of moving furniture and the like over to make it 'livable' (by Jack's standards), but Will had been largely content to have a bedroll and a place for a cookfire. His lack of comfort with enclosed spaces was still present, but he understood the practicality of having a warm and less dangerous place to rest his head. Logically, the elf knew that he couldn't spend every night on the edge of sleep, worried what the dreams would bring both outside and in.

They had also taken the time to store the remains of Randall Tier's body (what they could lift off of the corpse anyhow) for safe-keeping later. Should the Lady Seeker look into it, the land's ownership would reflect poorly on Jack, but both of them hoped it wouldn't get to that point. Lady Seeker Prurnell had already made a couple of threats when she learned that Jack wasn't having him followed, but the High Seeker's smooth assurance that Will was perfectly behaved and that more security would only make them look suspect or give the nobility more ammunition made her back off. Prurnell respected him and saw him as one of the only incorruptible Seekers with authority in the area, which is how he got the position. Jack knew his own game better than anyone else.

Of course, Freddie happened to show up at the farmstead when Will was busy trying to catch some food. He arrived just in time to see her sneak into the barn, precisely where he had been keeping Randall Tier's body with several preservation glyphs and the supplies the Seekers had used to butcher him. Immediately, he dropped his food and ran.

It was simple to clear the distance between his now bad fish and the barn; elves were faster by nature, but Freddie had already gone inside. He was careful to not burst in and startle her, knowing that would make it far worse. To her credit, she was simply staring at the body, hung out like drying meat, mouth agape without sound. The bard didn't scream or make a fuss, and, when she noticed him, her body merely jumped. No sound escaped. Will stepped between her and the exit, knowing this would probably go south very quickly.

They froze, neither sure who would make the first move nor where they would go. Will could see the daggers strung to the side of her hips, and she was watching his hands for a single twitch. Slowly, he raised them with a placating gesture. "There really is a very good explanation for all of this."

Freddie's eyes darted to the hanging carcass and instruments of destruction. "I don't want to hear it!"

"You got my invitation," Will stated flatly. "You came because you were curious about what I had to say. What I had to offer. You're not the least bit curious now?" Admittedly, he was saying it with pretty clear mockery. It made sense that she wouldn't be interested in what he had to say anymore. Part of him wanted to antagonize her, if only in response to all of the baiting she had done to him. He just needed to keep her busy long enough for Jack to arrive and give him credibility; he had told Will he would be visiting at some point to check in on the place, he just had business he needed to take care of in the city first. This would be the most opportune time for him to bust in.

"Get away from the door." Her hand twitched.

"Hear me out, Freddie. I know you're scared, but it only need be for a moment. Lay your daggers on the ground, and then we can talk." If she didn't, he was going to get skewered as soon as he said something she didn't like.

"You can't exactly lay down your weapons," she sneered. To be fair, Freddie was correct. "I'm not getting rid of mine." A quick flick of her wrist was all it took and a dagger went sailing towards him. Will's instincts kicked in and he moved to the side, the blade sinking into the wood behind him. The handle was still quivering.

Will launched himself at her and she danced away, her other dagger in hand. If he hadn't had magic, he would still have been at a disadvantage, her with a weapon and him without. That being said, she still had to run past him to exit, and Will waited for her to get just in range before letting out a blast of energy. It sent her flying into the wall, stunning her for a brief moment. He dashed towards her, preparing some rope from his pack to restrain her, while she recovered. She started to move and he launched another spell at her, creating a cone of force that rendered her immobile. Will watched as Freddie strained against it, but her body couldn't move. He only had a few moments, but he took advantage of her inability to resist. Once

wrists and arms were tied, he released the spell, his mana almost completely drained. He wouldn't be able to afford another spell.

Freddie slumped and Will kicked out one of her legs to put her off balance before dragging her away. He had some difficulty getting her to the barn, but she was light enough to drag her off to the 'house' with little issue. She yelled and thrashed, and Will just prayed that Jack would arrive soon.

"Let me go you fucking knife-ear!" Freddie yelled, kicking and screaming even as Will tied her down to the chair. He very deliberately had picked the most uncomfortable chair in the room out of spite. She had caused him enough headaches and was continuing to do so now.

Will rolled his eyes. "Now **shem**, I know you can be more creative than that." He jerked the rope. She should be glad it wasn't silk, that shit was extremely difficult to get out of. "Look, just calm down for a few minutes and then I will gladly untie you. We just need to talk first."

The Red Tattler abruptly stopped wriggling, and the sudden change in demeanor made Will re-check his knots. She did stiffen up her arms, so he sighed and waited until they inevitably relaxed before continuing. If he didn't she would relax them in the ropes and then work her way out. She huffed, noticing that he had caught on. "I'm not interested in being skewered."

"I'm not interested in skewering." One final twist and he was done. It wouldn't last overnight or anything, but it would last long enough for Jack to arrive and help smooth things over. He skated his eyes over her face and found hers were fixed on his. It made him shift uncomfortably as he tried to avoid them again, but it also meant that he couldn't look at her face for hints of duplicity. "Look, I only invited you here to discuss this with you. Hannibal Lecter wants you dead, and it's best for all of us if he thinks that you are. This way, you don't have to die, I don't have to kill anyone, and I still get his trust in the end."

She stared at him for a long time. "You're serious?" Will nodded. "Why the creepy shack?" It was a farmhouse. Not that Freddie would care. To her, they were probably the same thing.

Will sighed. "We needed somewhere that I could access some… suspect things without having to traipse them through the Bastion and get a lot of strange questions. The more people that know about the plan, the less likely it is to work. Jack arranged for me to have this place, which also means that we have somewhere to hide you." He purposefully made eye contact, painful as it was. It was only going to be for a moment, so it wasn't a big deal. "You were asking questions and being loud about it, as is your nature. Sooner or later, it would be loud enough for him to hear. You're lucky that you said something to Jack first. He helped come up with the plan so he knew we would have somewhere to keep you safe." He looked away.

"You're playing a game, a very dangerous one."

"I know," he accompanied the words with a snort. "He apparently was a good enough player to impress the Dowager; it's not going to be an easy one."

Freddie whistled. "Impressing the Dowager is not easy. You might be screwed."

“I might be, but he’s already shown me that I’m his weakness.”

She froze. “His weakness?” Then, the ginger started guffawing. “We started those rumors just to mess with him, they were just trying to bring down his reputation. You mean he actually has a soft spot for you? Maker-”

Will interrupted, “Just a soft spot.” His words were perhaps too vehement. “It wasn’t enough to keep him from abusing my mind or framing me for murder.” She stared. “We’re just trying to do this with minimal bloodshed. We’re sure he’s the Highwayman, but we don’t have enough evidence.”

“So I was right? Frederick Chilton wasn’t the Highwayman?”

A smile. “Isn’t actually. He’s still alive. Just buried somewhere in the dungeons in a cell with a lot of furnishings and amenities. Jack’s making sure that only a few trusted guards get to go down there and check on him. He isn’t locked in, seeing as him ‘escaping’ will just make everyone’s lives harder and put his neck on the chopping block.”

Freddie returned the smile. “He does like his neck.”

That’s when Jack caused Will to thank the Creators by showing up. He had been having a civil conversation with Freddie Lounds, so Will was almost sure that the world would be ending soon. The High Seeker’s presence seemed to cement something in her consciousness and both men felt comfortable enough to untie her. She was still wary, but intrigued enough to not immediately run away screaming. It also helped that Jack promised to compensate her for her services, which Will did not agree with. They had already guaranteed that she would get to keep her life, something she wouldn’t get to do without their interference. She also demanded to be kept updated on the various happenings of the Grand Game, which only caused Will to scowl. Jack put him on babysitting duty, which both of them did not like.

“I understand that this is difficult, but we’re having to put on a decent show,” Jack informed her. “We’ll do our best to compensate you for your time, care for you with decent amenities, and keep you updated, but we’ll both be busy.” He offered her a waterskin, since her voice was hoarse from yelling. She took it gratefully, but that didn’t stop her from disagreeing with him.

“This operation is already extremely risky,” Freddie argued. “Considering that my life is on the line, I’d like to be living in comfort should the worst occur.”

“The worst?” Will was a little unsure how exactly he would suffer from the situation.

Freddie explained. “You two are the only ones that know I’m here?”

They both nodded, but Jack clarified, “There are a couple of others that are going to know that you’re still alive, but for security’s sake, only we know your location.”

“If both of you were to die, then I would have no way of knowing if it is safe for me to leave. I’m not exactly a hunter, and I can take care of myself, but not against something like a… a

bear." That much had to be true. She looked to be about one hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. "I refuse to hide out here and die of starvation."

"We'll check on you and bring you the pamphlets when we get the time."

"Once per day," she argued. "I'm not that far away from the Bastion d'Argent. If one of you can be bothered to check on me and keep me updated, maybe bring some food, then I'll know you're alive and you know that I'll be."

Jack grimaced, "Fine."

"Thank you." Will didn't like how smug she seemed. "In return, I'll also do you another solid." Both of them waited for her offer. Idly, Will wondered if all bards like this much grandeur. "Will is going up against one of the most accomplished players of the Game, correct?" She somehow managed to be smug even as she was gulping down water."

Jack frowned even more. "He has one of the Black Fox's puzzle rings." Freddie Lounds spit out what water was in her mouth on Will. He only sighed and cleaned himself up with a rag.

"What?" she almost screeched. Then, she looked desperately at Will as if looking for confirmation.

Will shrugged, not sure what to say about it. "That's what he called it."

Mouth agape, she turned to Jack. The bard opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to gather the words she wanted to say. "I was only going to suggest it before, but now I'd like it to be a demand. I need to teach him to school his face better."

"You're not exactly great at hiding your emotions," Will accused.

"I am wonderful at it. Just because I'm emotive doesn't mean that I can't hide mine. I pick and choose what I show, exaggerating true and false emotions to suit my fancy. You only manage this blank stare, which just shows that you're trying especially hard to hide something. Sure I don't know how you feel, but I also know that you don't want me to know how you feel."

"Hannibal always looks blank-"

She groaned. "That works because his face **almost always looks blank**. If he showed any strong emotion at any point, the rest of the illusion would break. When he does, it's seen as the truth, but that doesn't mean it is. Even the Empress's blank expression shows something, usually amusement or disinterest. No expression at all gives you away." Will looked to Jack for help, but the man seemed to be nodding in agreement. "It's settled then," Freddie declared. "You're going to be my check in, and I'm going to teach you better ways to mask your emotions. I know this may seem like a shocker, but I'm rather attached to living."

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"I'm sorry for disturbing you, your Lordship, but I just need to verify that he was with you as he claimed," Jack said, looking sideways at Will. Hannibal was slightly surprised that the

young man used him as an excuse, but he supposed that a little help between friends wasn't an issue. This was especially true if Hannibal's suspicions were correct and Will simply got to their quarry first.

He hoped it was true, and his only regret was that he wasn't able to see Will in his full glory. As it stood, he could always ask for the gory details later. Will himself sat sullenly next to Jack, ever the picture of a petulant child being scolded. It was an amusing comparison, if inaccurate. He consoled himself with the fact that he still managed to not look guilty, only annoyed (even without the mask). It was promising for his state of mind.

"He was. I wasn't with him the whole time unfortunately, but as soon as you expressed your concerns I spoke with the servants and guards on the premises and they assured me that he was still there, communing with the horses on the estate." It wasn't completely helpful to Will, but it was enough. It would be interesting to see how his… protege managed to conduct himself.

"Jack I already told you," he complained, but the High Seeker raised a hand to cut him off.

"I just needed confirmation. We don't want anyone pointing fingers, especially when you had invited her to the Bastion and then she went missing. Covering our basis is the only way to keep the nobility off our backs." He looked apologetically to Hannibal. "No offense."

"None taken," he replied smoothly.

"Do you mind if I stay here tonight?" Will asked, then looked sheepishly to Jack. "The both of you. I know Jack will need to return to the Bastion before it gets too late, but I do have some things I'd like to discuss with Hannibal."

Jack gave Will a massive sidelong look, something curious and slightly disapproving of his request. Will's inquiry would do nothing to dispel rumors about the both of them, but rumors and gossip could be weaponized in his favor as much as it could be a detriment. The High Seeker sighed, then said, "So long as Comte Lecter is okay with it."

They both turned to him and he gave a small smile, slightly forced on his face. It was just fond enough that it could encourage anyone's imagination to run wild. "I do not mind at all." Jack nodded.

"I'll try and send an escort for your return tomorrow. Until then, I do need to be getting back." He managed an amused yet exhausted look. "Bureaucracy only waits for itself." They bid him adieu.

Hannibal brought Will to his kitchen. It was the pride and joy of his home; the room he had commissioned the most renovation on. He had found that the late Lord Froideveaux had very little idea what kind of money that someone should invest in such a space, despite the fact that most guests never saw it. The servants had been surprised that Hannibal insisted on cooking most meals for himself and only required chefs for meals too large to completely devote himself to or to take care of the other servants. He had even gone out of the way to ask them about their own recipes (which he would later improve on his own) or to teach some of the interested ones proper technique. The Comte only ever had patience for those that

actually tried, so the head cook often sent new recruits to him so that he could sift out the weak. As such, the servants let him have full reign in the kitchen and he was the only one that could tell the rest of them to leave. On a night like this, that is exactly what he did.

Will pulled out something, presumably meat, covered in wax paper. Inscribed on it was a preservation glyph meant to keep the meat from decaying. “You were kind enough to offer me a lesson. I’ve brought the meat.” He placed it in front of Hannibal and pushed it forward. “You’ll instruct me on how to prepare it.”

He smiled, pleased. For Will, he had been careful and respectful. Their trust was too tender and fragile to afford a misstep like the wrong meat in a dish. This, though. Will was engaging with the practice willingly. His consent was being given and he was the one initiating. He provided the meat. A swift slice of the knife was all he needed for his confirmation, the meat not quite right for beef or pork. “Red meat, but only just?” he asked, proud beyond measure. “Pork?” he prodded.

“A slim and delicate pig,” Will replied, eyes sparkling.

This was everything he wanted, Will by his side. “I have a dish in mind.” Gently, Hannibal grasped Will’s shoulder, enjoying the contact between them. “We’ll make it together.” Will grabbed a root, which Hannibal instantly recognized. It was the perfect opportunity for humor, so he reached for it. He grabbed a knife, handing off the handle with the blade poised near delicate wrists. “You slice the ginger.” Will grinned in return, a splendid savagery in his eyes.

Later, they dined together. The creation of the meal had felt intimate beyond measure and Hannibal reveled in sharing it with Will. This was another step closer to Will being ready to join him. His time here had grown dull, but not he would be able to share it. Hannibal knew that they could create beautiful art together, and they would watch as the people that called Will a friend but never bothered to know him would scramble in their wake.

The food sat beautifully in front of them, but, for the first time, his interest was entirely separate from the meal. As decadent as it looked, his eyes were for the young elven man across from him. Will made the first move, gently pulling the mask from his face to show it bare before Hannibal. It brought forth memories of tending to Will after Randall Tier, and he was overcome. One of the best moments of his life was being allowed to see Will so vulnerable and raw; having him engage in this knowingly and willingly was starting to overtake it. Will smiled without guile or intent. It was small and genuine, the expression rare on Will’s face. Hannibal followed suit, removing his mask as well. While in Red Crossing, Will saw his face plenty. It was a deliberate move to seem more powerful, above the Game. There was also the matter that no one in Red Crossing would care. Something had changed when he re-engaged with the Game, and he made efforts to not go bare-faced. Now, he was unmasked before Will in several ways, it only seemed fitting to make it physically as well.

Hannibal looked at Will closely now. Intent. Will seemed to recognize what he was waiting for and nodded. Rapt, Hannibal watched Will as he raised a forkful of the meat and ate it. The gesture brought a surprising amount of satisfaction. He took a mouthful himself and savored it. He knew that flavor. There was no hiding it. Will really did bring him human. He brought him Freddie Lounds, and he had terrorized her before the act.

He swallowed. “The meat has an interesting flavor. It's bracing. Notes of citrus.”

His eyes tracked Will as the young man savored another bite. “You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t take your meaning. My palate isn’t as refined as yours.” The sardonic grin was back. “Growing up in the forest will do that.”

Hannibal studied his food, finding his words. This was how people learned, effusing praises wouldn’t teach anything. Another bite. “Apart from humane considerations, an animal is generally considered more flavorful should they be stress-free prior to slaughter. This animal tastes frightened.” While the words might express disappointment, his expression itself was ecstatic.

Cocking his head, Will asked, “What does frightened taste like?”

“It’s acidic.”

Will snorted. “The meat is bitter about being dead.”

Will was joking, and Hannibal was immensely pleased. Still, it was time for him to be a bit more direct. “This meat is not pork.”

“It’s long pig,” Will replied, elongating the words. He punctuated the phrase by eating a large mouthful.

Chapter End Notes

Hahren: Elders, elder
Shem: Elven slur for humans. Derived from the word for human, shem'len, which means 'quick children'. This is in reference to the fact that elves were once believed to be immortal and interacting with humans caused them to start aging.
Aravel: word for the elven landships

Vhen'alas

Chapter Summary

> "Protect what matters with everything that you have or you'll have nothing and deserve it." - Aveline Vallen, Dragon Age:2

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> This entire chapter was a long time coming. I got much busier with going back to school and then having a new job, but I am currently in between semesters and am trying to catch up. It's been going well so far and hopefully this one of practice well allow me to put myself back where I wanted to be. I am also concurrently editing the first 'book'. I was having some trouble with consistency, and I'm sure I've backtracked or contradicted a couple of things, so they're being fixed.
> I also made a couple of minor changes to the first chapter. Anora is now Queen and Alistair is not a monarch, and Will has dark green vallaslin, not dark red.

> Vhen'alas: The land itself, the ground/foundation, 'our earth'

Will stared helplessly at the mirror again. He was drawn in, entranced by the heady feeling of it. He wasn't vain, but the reflection would be something to behold.

If there had been anything to behold. The mirror was empty. Its surface was opaque, and it was only the inherent knowledge that came with dreams that told him that it was a mirror instead of a glass-like surface stuck in a frame. It was twice his height and four times his width, a great archway to an empty space. A void door.

He stood, helpless, as his hand went against his will and caressed the surface. Where his fingertips touched, it rippled, and in the ripples he caught a glimpse of a great dark city beyond. An endless green sky littered with rocks greeted him alongside floating and upside down buildings. The ripples stretched beyond his hand upward, reaching the top of the mirror. The shockwave of it echoed downwards as the surface showed more of the alien landscape with the strange quality that came from reflecting. Will glanced behind him, but he was just in a barren room. No landscape. No city.

Finally, the mirror reached the space that Will was in, but he was not there. Instead, there was a grand shadow, taller and broader than him but not by much. It was a swarm of vibrating motes, looking where he was and touching what he was touching. Will moved his hand and the shadow followed it. A pit grew in his stomach. Normally, Will would think that he could handle something like this, but the rampant anxiety that grew from the idea of this thing mirroring him was building inside. He clamped down as best he could, wary about coaxing any demons to the area.

He took his racing mind elsewhere by ignoring it outright, doing his best to keep his thoughts from straying towards it. He took in the environment on the other side and a peculiar thought occurred to him. Much of the landscape reminded him of the few times that he was more cognizant in the Fade and confronted by demons outright, without pretense. It looked like the Fade but for a few more tangible parts of it. Spirits usually conjure what appears in dreams, being reflections of reality themselves, so it wouldn't be difficult to imagine that the Fade in dreams was what it actually looked like. Most religions had a story that described the Fade as a place where someone could physically go as well as in dreams.

The dread deepened. His mind began to race with intrusive thoughts, flitting from one to the next. If that was what the Fade actually looked like, then he was the one stuck. The shadow was there. It was real. Will was in the dream. The shadow was in the world. What if the shadow wasn't the thing in the mirror?

What if Will was the reflection?

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Alana.

I hate to bother you, but I find myself worried. Brian and I have been talking about the situation here in the Bastion and we're concerned that Will is pushing himself too hard. He's killed someone now, a man named Randall Tier. Former werewolf actually. Jack won't give us the details, but the body afterward was eviscerated, and we know that he's the one that did it. Will's been spending more and more time with Hannibal Lecter and less time here.

He's definitely spent less time healing. I understand that, after all he's done for you, you think the world of Hannibal, but whatever is happening is bad for Will. He's withdrawing. We've been trying to talk to Will to see where his headspace is at, but he's rebuffed us every time. I'm starting to think that he's hiding something, even though that's the last kind of assumption I want to make.

This is ridiculous. Alana, I want you to do something, anything. Jack respected you and thought of you as a bright and burning student before you left to find your own way. I fear that with Miriam and Beverly gone, Jack has tunnel vision, and he's allowed it to color his actions. He exists in a place where he is simultaneously pushing and indulging Will.

Just… Get back as soon as you can. Maybe you can talk some sense into someone. Preferably Jack, because if Jack pulls back, he'll pull Will with him. I hope. The alternative is to watch them both free fall.

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They had finally returned and she had a letter about the situation with Will that set her on edge in hand. The messenger bird that it had been sent with had caught Alana within a couple of days of the Bastion d'Argent, the group she had been training with fast approaching, and its contents had only spurred her onward. Alana knew that her relationship with Will hadn't been wonderful when she had left; it wasn't bad per say, but they could have separated on better terms, yet she still saw him as something akin to a friend. If Jack and Will were pushing themselves over the edge in a bid to do something about Hannibal, then she was going to do what she could to stop it.

In bright armor, emblazoned with the symbols of the Seekers of Truth, Alana marched through the fortress until her eyes trained on Jimmy and Brian, both of whom were speaking together in hushed tones. Something in their eyes made her wary immediately, but she wasn't one to back down. They were caught up in their own conversation until, finally, when she was within a couple yards of them, did they notice her. They stopped speaking and glanced at her nervously.

"I got your letter," Alana said and Jimmy gave a full-bodied wince. The movement drew Brian's attention and he looked at Jimmy quizzically. So both of them hadn't agreed to send it to her, or, at the very least, Jimmy had sent it without Brian's knowledge.

"We sent quite a few," Brian started, but Jimmy shook his head.

"I sent one to her five days ago." The way that Brian's eyes bulged out of his head gave Alana a bad feeling in her gut.

"The situation?" she demanded.

"Has changed," Jimmy replied with finality.

"In four days?"

Brain muttered, "A lot can happen in four days."

She grimaced and kept herself from spitting out the words, but only just. "What. Happened."

For a moment, silent communication passed between them. Anyone that knew them well enough could tell that they were clearly arguing. She had left because she felt like she was the odd one out, that she didn't fit there. The letters that all three had been sending her had brought some comfort and had convinced Alana that she had a place in the group among them, but now she was even further away than before. Before, she had just felt misplaced, but now knowledge was deliberately being withheld from her, and neither of the two men showed any sign that they would cease their argument anytime soon. "I can always just find out myself," she growled, and the declaration had the desired effect. Both of them looked suitably chastised.

"Look, Alana, we just don't know how to tell you-"

Brian interrupted Jimmy's excuses. "Someone's dead. Someone is dead, and it doesn't look good."

"Someone is dead," Alana repeated slowly. "And?" She hadn't meant for the question to come out flippantly, but Jimmy's reaction said that it had.

Brian continued, "It's all rather ambiguous. From the way it looks, Will might have been the one to do it, and it wasn't clean. Vicious even."

The novice frowned, "I know about Randall Tier, Brian. Maybe not all of the situation, but I still know some of it." Jimmy was very precise in avoiding her gaze.

"Well, the problem is that it's not just Randall Tier."

Alana froze, both inside and out. "Who else?"

His face twisted up. "Maybe Freddie Lounds. She sent a missive to her innkeeper that she was going to visit Will and to send us a message if she didn't return. We were notified this morning."

Eyes narrowing, she demanded, "Tell me more." This time, she wasn't going into this kind of confrontation blindly.

The explanation was swift and pushed her even further. Immediately after her conversation with Jimmy and Brian, Alana went looking for Will. Try as her former friend might, he wasn't going to get out of this. Already, she was forced to deal with the fact that he killed and mutilated someone. This Randall Tier may not have been a good person, but it was Will. The last time he hurt a person (that wasn't possessed) it caused him to break down for months, to the point where he ended up in a situation that got him imprisoned. More importantly, the way that he treated the body seemed extremely unlike him. It hurt a little. She didn't blame him, but it was hard to reconcile the Will of before, the one she gaped at for walking into a Chantry, sullen and sad, with the Will now. This was, of course, ignoring the possible fact that Freddie Lounds was dead at his hands. She didn't feel like dealing with that just yet; one problem at a time. Now, said problem was tiredly sharpening a couple of small daggers and trying to hand-repair some armor.

Will was always a puzzle, but now she's found that the pieces have been rearranged. It was a mystery to her whether the picture would be the same afterwards.

He looked up from his spot when her booted feet entered his vision. He sighed, and Alana tried to prepare herself for their discussion.

"Hello, Seeker Bloom."

Alana frowned. "I'm not a Seeker yet. I'm still just Alana."

"Are we on friendly terms now?"

Flinching, she replied, "What happened before was wrong, and I want to apologize for my behavior. I was allowing my frustration with the situation to color my vision and how I

treated you. While I may not agree with some of what was done, I have no right to judge you."

"No. You don't." He sheathed the daggers harshly and stood. "Why are you here?"

"I've returned to continue my training. I've cleared my head for long enough."

"That's not what I meant. Why are you **here**, talking to me?" His ears flattened slightly and pushed back, reminding her distinctly of a cat when it was threatened.

"I guess," she started and then fidgeted slightly. His eyes were looking everywhere but her own, but they contained an edge that she wasn't used to. Will may not have been making eye-contact, but his implied assessment was sharp and unyielding. "I'm concerned. I've been hearing about the situation second-hand, and I don't understand-"

"You don't, Alana," Will snapped. "You don't understand."

"I'm worried! And I'm not the only one."

Will glanced around at the people that were listening in on their conversation before just walking off. Alana's protests rang behind him, and she followed him through the halls of the Bastion until he walked into a storage closet and waited for her. "Will, what is going on? As soon as I got to the Bastion, I spoke with Brian and Jimmy. They've been communicating about what was happening, and it seems to be getting out of hand."

"Just leave it alone," Will growled.

"I heard that Freddie Lounds might be dead!"

"And you think that I killed her?"

She frowned. She wasn't sure, but she didn't want to believe it. Brain and Jimmy had seemed convinced earlier, but that didn't make them right. She wasn't going to ask Jack first, she wanted to hear Will's part in the story. Unfortunately, he wasn't cooperating. "I don't know. Did you?"

"What do you think?" he asked vehemently.

"I think that's the wrong answer to tell somebody who is already asking the question," she shot back.

"Are you wondering what I'm capable of?"

"Stop it," Alana commanded. "You're trying to intimidate me, make me scared, but it's not working. I am afraid, Will, but not of you. I'm afraid for you. Whatever you're doing with Hannibal, it's not good for you. I'm hearing from others how it is destroying you, and I want to help."

Then something cracked. Will's face broke open, the shell of anger he had been holding onto splitting into something tired and sad. "Alana," he said, his voice cracked and hushed. "I

can’t talk about this right now.”

The Seeker held out her arms, but they were ignored by Will, who slumped against the wall as the rest of the energy that the anger granted him drained out of him. She put them back down. “That’s fine for now, but please think more about yourself. I just returned, and I’ve already noticed. I can’t imagine how bad it must be for you to be like this already.” He nodded, but she wasn’t sure if he actually heard her.

She didn’t think it was possible, but the situation only got worse from there. While she didn’t appreciate Will attempting to intimidate her over the course of their conversation, Alana felt like that had reached something by the end. She still wasn’t on-board with everyone’s idea that Hannibal was evil, but she wasn’t going to reject the notion either. At this point, they were so vehement that the matter was worth looking into. But what Will was doing… that couldn’t be healthy, regardless of the truth of the situation. Spending so much time around a person and lying to them, driving yourself into the position of being one thing and then pretending to be another, hurt. This was especially true when there was something happening that Will wasn’t telling anyone else. That was what she believed before it got worse.

But then a young novice, younger than herself, brought the body in.

It was half charred and burned, the ashy and crisp flesh covering most but not all of the skin. It was enough to see the stark sharpness of the features and the remaining springy ginger hair clinging to the scalp. “We found the body about fifty klicks from here,” they said, shifting from side to side in their greaves. Jack sighed, steadfast in his world-weariness.

Jimmy appeared behind Alana, startling her slightly. She still wasn’t used to how quietly the man could walk when he really tried. “On Comte Lecter’s land.” That was what had bothered him. Alana’s eyes slipped to the side as they started transporting the body into holding, watching as Will approached. Jack made a subtle motion and the mage cast a preservation glyph on it, keeping it from decaying further. “Did anyone-”

“As soon as the body was found,” Brian replied. “Don’t worry, we notified him.” So Hannibal had already been told. “She had belongings on her,” the alchemist continued with a grimace. He held a pack in his hand, carefully not examining the corpse further. Alana found herself instead entranced by the chiaroscuro of scorched skin, clothing half melted into the flesh from the heat even where the skin was blistered and bubbling rather than charred. “ETA on the Comte?” Jack prompted.

“A few more hours, then he should be here.” Jack grunted an affirmative and they brought their package into the bowels of the fortress.

A few minutes of meticulous searching told Alana who the corpse was: Freddie Lounds. It was all of her worst fears realized. Brain and Jimmy had told her about the Tattler’s arrangement with the innkeeper, but part of the Seeker in training had hoped it was the ginger woman pulling an awful trick to get back at Will. A body, her body, here in the Bastion meant something rather different. She glanced over at the men, catching their eyes. They were looking anywhere but her, and her stomach clenched.

They sort of began examining the body. Jack was putting it off for quite a while, which confused Alana. Granted, he could probably just be avoiding facing what had happened. If the boys were correct and Will had killed Freddie Lounds, a lot of the blame could come back on him. After what had happened previously, Alana wouldn't have been surprised. It was one thing to suspect your friend of being a murderer and having been partially responsible or blind to it. It was another thing to suspect, be wrong, and then have put them in the situation to actually kill someone. Even worse when the person might think themselves justified for reasons that could be absolute druffalo shit as far as Alana was concerned. Finally, the High Seeker noticed the rest of them getting antsy and approved of them continuing with the examination. Shortly after, Will walked into the room, Comte Hannibal Lecter in tow.

He peered at all of them, no change visible on his face although Alana thought she saw a fraction of discomfort. The smell was horrendous and she knew he had a sensitive nose. "Whom might this be?"

Both Jimmy and Brian clammed up, so that left it up to her to tell her long-time friend just who died near his property (and thus became his responsibility). "Fredericka Lounds. Red Tattler."

Jimmy sniffed the body. "Partially magical fire and partially not. The ozone smell that comes with magic is still there, but I also smell oil. It's possible that the killer attacked with a fire spell, but unless it is something like a fireball, that doesn't immolate the body. Instead, they burned and later, instead of using magic to burn the rest of the body, the killer set them on fire."

The alchemist pointed out the bubbling skin. "Here. This is probably where they were burned originally. It's also possible that Freddie may have put on a fire resistant salve to counteract the damage, which would have remained there after death. Thus, it would have fought against the fire for some time-"

"Which would have been prolonged if the body had also been preserved, and the salve with it," Jimmy finished.

Alana swallowed. "Why preserve the body?"

Raising an eyebrow, Hannibal repeated the question. "I also wish to know where it was found."

"It was found on the edge of your land," Jack informed Hannibal. "It was tied to a burned tree with a sword pushed through her heart." The noble looked thoughtful.

"Imitating Andraste's death and the mercy of Hessarian?" Alana asked. "That seems an odd thing to do."

Will glanced up; his eyes flashed darkly. "Freddie often tried to preach against others, martyring herself in her bid to spread the falsehoods she called the 'truth', but was truly trying to stir up trouble." His eyes trained themselves on the corpse, voice chillingly somber. "He put her out of her misery."

“The blade of Hessarian granting peace to Andraste is also where the Templar Order got their symbol,” Hannibal said, receiving a nod of confirmation from Jimmy. “A sword wreathed in the flame of her pyre.”

“She was a message,” Alana breathed out, drawing the conclusion that no one wanted to say aloud. “Her body was preserved so the killer would be able to threaten the Templars, making it discernable and likely hoping that someone would notice the presence of magical fire.”

“Or they were too impatient to get it over with and misjudged the effect preserving a salve might have,” Will pointed out, but the small smile on his face was still there. He agreed with her. Or did he know that she was right?

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Will was staring at the table, gently tracing the patterns in the mat in front of him with the tip of his finger. This was it, the dinner after Hannibal received ‘confirmation’ of Freddie Lounds’ death. Will had made his public excuses to Jack, knowing that the other man was aware of what Will was doing, and then met up with Hannibal outside of the Bastion. The man was ridiculously pleased, if the slightly upturned corners of his lips was any indication, and had invited him back to the Comte’s estate for dinner.

The warmth of the room was smothering, even without the heat of the fire. Hannibal’s choice of setting was the smallest dining room in the estate, likely to make the affair more intimate. The table only seated eight people, and both men were to be seated at one side, end to corner. The meal that Hannibal brought out was… interesting.

“An Orlesian Nesting Roast in tribute to your victory,” Hannibal declared, placing what appeared to be a larger than normal swan on the table.

“Nesting roast?” Will asked, almost a little nervous for the eventual explanation. Clearly the meal held some significance if it was a ‘tribute to his victory’. “This looks like a swan.”

Hannibal gave a bland smile, one usually reserved for guests, that gradually brightened (and decreased in size) into something more genuine. “It is a quail within a pheasant within a swan. The empty spaces are filled with spiced meat, in this instance sausage.” He gave a meaningful glance. “Herbed butter is rubbed on and under the skin and they each deboned and then trussed inside each other. I saw fit to put them back together. The meal was once very popular, but is slightly less so now. Those who make it usually do so in tribute to the Gift of Flesh made by Bernard Heileux, a dish so extravagant and ghastly that many fainted upon its reveal.”

“What could cause people to faint at the sight of food?” inquired Will while he privately thought that knowing the meal contained people was a perfectly good reason to do so.

“It was a whole wyvern stuffed with an entire gurn, then stuffed with a horse, which also contained a halla, horns and all. The halla had a swan inside, which had a duck stuffed a quail pushed into it. Finally, the quail had a bunting inside which had been choked on a gold piece that had been shoved down its throat. Huileux considered it his culinary masterpiece. I find it

rather gauche, if ambitious, considering that wyverns are highly venomous with some of the poison even secreting from its very skin."

"Ambitious is one way to put it," Will considered while he privately mourned the halla that had been sacrificed for such pride.

"Some of the nobles attending refused to eat it without the serviettes being draped over their heads to hide from the Maker. It was offensive to them, but the dish was made for the birthday Emperor Reville, who often killed those that refused them, their entire house alongside them."

"I'm not surprised." Will stared at the birds on the table, not sure if he felt comfortable eating the tribute to such a dish. "Although they may not be to those humans, the halla are sacred to my people."

Hannibal looked thoughtful. "The dish existed long before Emperor Reville or Huileux, Will. It simply is no longer popular and heavily associated with the man. People even wear their serviettes while consuming the dish as acknowledgement of the nearly taboo homage to the men, although the practice was not in place before."

"I'm surprised you created this for a celebration of my victory."

"I made this dish in honor of you conquering your most irritating foe. She was a pest that will soon be forgotten in the fast pace of the Game."

"Not by us."

"No. I suppose she won't be by us." The noble placed a hefty piece on Will's plate before adding one to his own, ensuring that all three birds were present. He sat, then stared at Will, gaze frozen on the elf. "Are you ashamed of your accomplishment? Would you rather wear a serviette to hide from your own gods?"

"I suppose you don't," Will said, toying with the edge of his and deciding what to do. Not that his own gods would really care. They were too busy wandering the Abyss or the Fade for a human transgression to bother them (although Ghilan'nain and Andruil might care about the halla eating tribute).

A spark of mischief twinkled behind Hannibal's eyes, even as the rest of his face had fallen into implacable and faint amusement. "Never." He speared the birds with his fork and raised it to his lips.

"All three birds?" Hannibal nodded at Will's question, and Will sighed.

He followed Hannibal's lead and opened his mouth, allowing the smaller 'gift of flesh' to sit on his tongue. The juice and different textures of the birds mingled into one, a full bodied note that swirled and tried to spill from his lips. The flavor was… indescribable, each crush of his teeth squeezing out more of it. The spice from the sausage stuffed in the empty spaces added a tingle to the rest of it, which resonated through his whole mouth. Will had never tasted something before that caused his neck to shiver and the oddness of the feeling had him

close his eyes. The process was prolonged by the amount of meat that needed to be consumed, each chew only reducing it into smaller and smaller pieces that slid down his throat until finally it was gone.

Will opened his eyes to find Hannibal staring at him, utter entrancement written across his face in a surprising display of unhindered emotion.

“The first time I partook of this dish, I was euphoric,” Hannibal whispered out.

“It was unlike anything I had ever had before,” Will admitted, also knowing that the knowledge would greatly please Hannibal. The man enjoyed being the one to give Will new experiences. He would even go so far to say that the man might have gotten off on it, but it was hard to picture Hannibal as a sexual being.

Will started to raise his fork for another bite, looking directly at Hannibal’s eyes in challenge, contrary to his normal behavior, when Hannibal reached out to his hand and stilled it. “Perhaps we should take this elsewhere?” Will slowly put the fork back down, body in tremors as he tried to decide how he was going to respond, mind chanting ‘not a sexual being’ even as Hannibal gently guided Will into standing and out of the room.

He glanced back to the unfinished dish. Hannibal wasn’t the type of man that would ever cut a meal short.

Much to his relief, they only went to the study where a roaring fire was waiting. A servant scurried outside of his field of vision. Hannibal swiftly moved to serve them some sort of alcohol and returned to him just as quickly. “Abyssal peach liquor,” was all he said and Will barely refrained from tossing it back. Instead, he stared at the glass, unsure of how to proceed. Whatever hunger he may have had before had subsided. Well, the physical hunger at least. Instead, he was left for this yearning for stimuli, although he wasn’t sure from what. Conversation? Intellectual equality that came from being with this man? Validation or perhaps something else?

Devotion?

“It is an ecstatic reminder of our power over life and death.”

Will started. “I’m sorry.”

“The dish,” Hannibal explained and then continued his pulling of Will. The elf was quickly seated, caught in the same trance that had consumed Hannibal during their shortened meal. “The emperor who had it had such power over his people. Every time I consume it…”

“You are reminded of your own,” Will finished for him.

“Exactly.” Will swirled the liquor in the glass, highly aware of the warmth on his arm from Hannibal’s touch. The intimacy of the moment was strong, the air charged in a way that he wasn’t expecting. The elf suddenly became aware that the noble’s leg was resting against his own and one of his ears twitched. The hand slid up his arm to his shoulder and the movement startled Will. He turned to face Hannibal and found that they were right near each other,

breathing the same air. He fought to keep his other arm from going limp and dropping the glass, knowing that it would spill and stain the floor. His body wavered, nearly tipping forward as he felt pulled to the other man. ‘Indescribable,’ Will had called the dish in privacy in his own thoughts. Seeing the utter hold he had on this man was the same: intoxicating even. He could continue, Will knew. No one but the two of them would ever have to know it went any farther than this moment, a small and hovering stretch of time that never had to be mentioned or spoken aloud again.

Even as the thought struck him, he knew he couldn’t. The sharpness of the realization, the turn of his thoughts, broke the spell and nearly sent him into a panic. What was he thinking? This man had done so much to him. It was a wash of cold through him and Will pulled back, giving them some distance so he could pull the rot from his thoughts. “I was euphoric when I killed Freddie Lounds,” he said slowly, lying.

He hadn’t lied before. Never without some grain of truth to it, but this was a blatant and complete falsehood. Still, with the hold he had over Hannibal, the man would believe it. He wanted too much for it to be true.

It was necessary though. Will… Will needed this to be over with. This addiction to what Hannibal gave him was growing out of hand and to remain in the man’s presence could push him over the edge. He would come to regret what could have been, had none of this happened. Acceptance was a heady drug, but justice was required, for himself, for Jack. For Abigail. This would be a push, something to make Hannibal want all the more to acquire him for himself. The near kiss - because not admitting what it was was tantamount to letting go of a potential weapon- had revealed another weakness for both of them. His perceived admission would spur the noble into more action.

“Did your heart race?”

Will swallowed, allowed himself to be perceived as vulnerable. “No. It didn’t.”

“ A low heart rate is a true indicator of one’s capacity for violence.” Did Will imagine the breathiness? “You are evolving. I remember a young man that trembled at the very thought of enacting death on another. Your choices are affecting every aspect of yourself.”

“Killing is changing the way I think,” Will muttered darkly, falling back into half-truths now. One was enough.

“You are finally accepting yourself, truly. Blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance.” Hannibal finally removed his hand from Will’s shoulder, but it still did not leave his arm. “Just as the source of light is burning.” Will trembled now, conviction wavering again even as he dragged his fragile hold upon it. He couldn’t let go, not again. Hannibal placed the hand on his back. “There’s so much I want to show you, Will.”

Will knew it and part of him wanted to see it. That quiet longing was now his biggest fear.

Will stared at the ornate ceiling, thoughts subdued despite everything. He had stayed the night again.

Nothing had happened, but that hadn't stopped Will from feeling further conflicted about it. The intimacy of the moment with Hannibal coupled with the man's clear delight in Will… it stirred up something. Hannibal… made him feel welcome. Loved wasn't the right word, but there was a strange sort of reverence, an admiration muddled with pride, that came whenever Hannibal looked at him. There was a validation there that wasn't present in any other aspect of his life, not in work or among the people that he called friends. Acknowledging how addicting it was didn't seem to spur it into stopping.

Of course, Will knew there was another reason that Hannibal had encouraged him to stay over the course of the drink. They had a moment away from everything else after the second glass, their fireside chat continuing into the night, where Hannibal had left him alone in his study. Will, who had been fighting to keep remembering the reason that he was there after the breathtaking conversation over the liquor and dinner, immediately began snooping. His brain was too distracted to do anything properly, but he had seen that Margot had been invited to join Hannibal over breakfast this morning. The man was very organized about his schedule, even if he only put the things appropriate to spy on in possible view. Freddie had said that the best thing about nobles is that they usually leave a paper trail, but Will had yet to find anything suggesting that Hannibal wasn't somehow a mage that had discovered time travel.

The sunlight hit just the right angle over the bed that it got in Will's eyes and he rolled away from the window, feeling it warm his back. Leaving the room meant seeing Hannibal again, and he didn't want to right now. Just a few more moments was all he wanted. A few moments where he wasn't dunking himself under the mire of emotions that swirled whenever he was in proximity to Hannibal. His duty and anger dimmed whenever he was in the man's presence, so caught up in the current as he was, but flared whenever he was away, betrayed as he was by his behavior during moments like last night. This bedroom was a liminal space. It was warm and quiet, muddled just enough by Hannibal's very essence, seeing as it was the man's home, but Will didn't have to look him in the eyes and see the twisted obsession that was felt for him. If only he could stay there, in this one solitary moment of time, and never have to leave.

Eventually, though, the elf had to. The sun had brightened up the room from pre-dawn grey and he could no longer give Hannibal the excuse that a comfortable bed was a rare luxury. The noble knew Will's sleeping habits well enough that he would expect him to get up at some point on his own, which always made Will slightly uncomfortable. It wasn't that it bothered him necessarily, someone knowing him so well. It was more that the fond scrutiny that the unspoken knowledge implied flattered Will, and then that feeling is what bothered him.

When he left the room, Will heard voices murmuring from the foyer, and a quick peek confirmed that Margot had arrived. Instead of getting it over with, Will gathered up some of the more plain clothes that Hannibal had supplied him (against his protests), and then he went to the washroom. There was already water in the tub, clean and steaming from a weak fire rune. That honestly made him feel worse.

A short wash later and he was heading downstairs to the dining hall. The warm water had set off anxious alarms in his head, echoing his screaming thoughts from the night before that this was going too long. He did not luxuriate as Hannibal had probably intended, but gave himself a perfunctory once over before drying off and joining the other two. As he approached, the soft words grew louder.

“There is no baby, not yet. The bard that I spoke with was very discrete and confirmed that they could potentially get someone that would supply me with what I need.”

“A donor?” Hannibal asked and Will rolled his eyes.

Apparently Margot felt the same, if her tone was any indication, but she was too polite. Clearly, Hannibal had a reputation for not tolerating discourtesy even among the nobility, although they probably did not understand the extent of his ire for the perceived slights. The noblewoman clarified what she meant, “Of sorts. More importantly it is someone that understands that his help will not be needed afterward and who knows better than to stake any sort of claim. Blackmail will not be tolerated. He will receive his one time payment for services rendered and any subsequent attempt to ‘get involved’ will result in swift retribution.”

“You are already anticipating this, even before it has occurred,” Hannibal replied, and Will walked into the room. The table was set for three, so Hannibal must have expected him to arrive at some point during the conversation. The food was rich and filling, something made for someone that could potentially be feeding two. He had done it on purpose clearly to goad or stir something in Margot; was she aware of what he was doing?

Margot acknowledged his entrance with a friendly smile and nod as Will took his place as Hannibal’s right hand, sitting directly across from her. Her eyes flickered minutely between them before she settled a stray thought before it showed on her face. He appreciated her control, especially now that Freddie had given him some advice on how to keep his own expressions in check without appearing like he was doing so. It was much more difficult than it appeared. “I’ll admit,” she replied while slicing into a tender piece of meat, “that some part of me feels like I would be undoing everything that was ever done to me. Giving this life and raising them as my own would be able to free me from Mason and Molson.”

Hannibal nodded sagely. “Children are the future and they can be a way to disrupt our own sense of the past. We can protect them in ways in which we were not.”

“Life bounces back.”

“You can reclaim yours, Margot.” Will glared quietly, letting some irritation show in an attempt to rattle a stray flicker on Hannibal’s smooth expression. Nothing occurred. “Your capacity to care about this child will incur a cost to yourself. How much will you give?”

Margot frowned. “I could be good to a child.”

“You’ve conspired with your unborn child to liberate yourself.”

“I’m not proud of myself,” she sighed. Will delicately picked at his food. “I know that this would put them in danger, and I’ll admit that it is for selfish reasons. I want the power, the money, the life that was denied to me, and I am completely willing to use them to have it. I do want them though, for their own sake. The moment they come into this world and I can confirm that they’re a son, I’ll be able to take Mason out of it. A daughter won’t be perceived as a threat, but hopefully I can hide them before Mason finds out. I will keep trying until I have one that keeps us safe, and then he will be gone. The only other way would be for Mason to have a child, then they could be an heir regardless of sex, but I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, the mother or the baby.”

She shrugged, and Hannibal’s posture grinned for his face. Will hid his expression of wariness and unease behind food. “You will have to be careful Margot, you don’t know what might set your brother off.”

Margot sniffed. “I am not stupid. Running away indefinitely would be impossible with his resources, but hopefully I can abscond until I am too gravid for the courts to ignore. At that point, any harm that came to the baby could be linked to Mason, and the sympathy that could garner me might get me some of what I want anyway.”

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Mason was pacing around his study while Hannibal sat at his desk, perched with the distinct interest that a bird of prey gives their quarry. The marquis had arrived to pick up his sister and then sent her on her way toward the estate. Will had left a short time before that, excuses tripping off his tongue, confidence wavering when Hannibal gave his goodbye personally. The night before had been an exercise in resisting temptation. Watching Will come into his own power and flirting with the forbidden had struck Hannibal with a desire to mold and possess the likes which he hadn’t anticipated. Will was captivating. Their quiet farewell had tested his willpower to not grab the young man and drag him back into the house, but he had an appointment to keep. Mason Verger was lucky that the night and morning had turned out so well, and that the brief moment the marquis and elf had crossed paths had stayed that way. Brief.

The nobleman in question was staring at each piece of art in the study, but clearly was not appreciating any of the subtle detail that had gone into the work. He stared and then moved on to the next piece, eyes glazed over. “You have a lot of beautiful things, Comte.” The address was spoken flippantly. “I grew up with huge wealth, but the Vergers were originally from rough stock. We clawed our way to power so long ago, keeping up with the rest of the nobility right at the beginning of the Grand Game.” Many nobles in Orlais claimed the same, but there was rarely ever any proof. Somehow, Hannibal doubted that the Verger family came from the original nobles and feudal lords that had stalked the lands prior to Emperor Drakon I. “He was a hard man, proud of our heritage as having earned what we had, so be bought things that rich people buy. When he died, I threw it all away. He had no eye for the exquisite as you do.”

Hannibal knew enough about Mason to know that his tastes ran expensive but gaudy. He certainly knew his textures, but patterns and the art of subtle power through decor was lost on him. Margot managed it well enough on her own, but fashion alone could only do so much.

“You have pretty things too,” Mason said with a slight smirk and waggled his eyebrows when he saw Hannibal looking. The crass behavior reminded Hannibal of children, and he had a suspicion that Mason was referring to Will. The Comte had made sure that all of his younger servants, particularly the male ones, were hidden during the time that Mason spent over.

Mason plopped down on one of his more expensive chairs. “Growing up, my father wanted to express how appreciative he was of the common man. As I told you, we were from rough stock and his pride demanded that we help those like we once were.” No matter whenever the Verger family’s fortune actually turned into nobility, Hannibal highly doubted that Molson Verger had anything to do with it. The man had been a chevalier and they are required to be born nobility. “He wanted the local children to be educated so he set up a small school. It was only to make sure that they knew their letters and basic math, something invaluable in this kind of world. So many of our poorer folk are absolutely illiterate.”

“Your father was a generous man,” Hannibal flatly replied.

“I continue his charitable work today,” Mason continued, either not aware of Hannibal’s derision or simply not caring. “Most of the children that end up in the schools are unfortunates and would do anything for a sweetie.” The Comte deliberately ignored the attempt Mason put out there to get Hannibal to make him elaborate. He knew enough about Marquis Verger that he already thought him despicable. No need to add more fuel to the fire that would only give him knowledge that he would wish he didn’t have. The petulant manchild sighed. “Maybe I took advantage. Maybe I was rough with them if they didn’t do what I said. It doesn’t matter really, they are still just peasants, but some people don’t like it when you treat peasants like the dirt they truly are.” He grinned, off and with too many teeth. “I was aware at a very early age of my willingness to inflict damage on those around me. Papa called it ‘altruistic punishment’.”

A blink. “More commonly referred to as ‘spite’.”

“Papa was a prodigy,” Mason said with breathless reverence, once again ignoring Hannibal. At this point, it was more amusing than irritating. Knowing what he had planned for the idiot made the waiting all the more delectable. “He had so much experience with meat, but his real genius was for human nature. He could look at a man and see his weakness.”

“Could he see yours?” Hannibal asked, done with the conversation, but humoring Mason for now.

“He saw my sister’s.”

“Yet he shaped Margot as clearly and as certainly as he shaped you.” Mason looked at him sharply, not pleased with the idea. “Your father is dead. A boy’s illusions are no basis for a man’s life, Mason.” Time to put his plan into motion and wrap up the time that he would have to suffer through Mason. It would be lovely to see what Will would do with the opportunity that Hannibal gave him. He’d already swatted one fly. “Margot is the only family you have left.”

Mason rolled his eyes. “My sister loves me, Comte Lecter. She has to or she has nothing.”

“Vergers are noted expansionists,” Hannibal rolled out.

Mason’s brow furrowed. “I am the sole Verger heir.”

“For now. Biology is a funny thing.”

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Abigail observed Mason from the shadows of her wing, carefully avoiding entering any line of sight. Will had stayed the night again, so she had been forced to stay in her room, not that she minded. It meant that Will was there and that he and Hannibal were communicating. Every second they spent together was a second towards them being a family again. This Mason Verger had been visiting more often though. It had only been a few times, but the space between each visit had been shrinking. His manic demeanor and unpredictable behavior made her nervous, especially since she saw the way he treated Margot. It made her think of Garrett Hobbs and his implicit threats should she not do as he wished. She was in a much better place now; Hannibal took care of her and protected her from the people who would harm her.

Honestly, she wasn’t quite sure what to do about this man. He wasn’t the type of person that Hannibal normally associated with, nor a person that he would want to be associated with. She would think that she knew him well enough to place whom Hannibal thought worth his time. The nobleman was picky like that. There was just an air around Mason Verger that made her distinctly uncomfortable, and made her worry for Margot and Will.

“Why did you let him in?” Abigail asked Hannibal once their unwelcome guest was gone and it was safe for her to come downstairs. Hannibal hummed in response. “You hate people like him.”

“He was banal,” Hannibal agreed. “But necessary at the moment. Besides, it would have been rude to refuse him.”

Abigail pointed out, “It was rude of him to impose on your presence without implicit or explicit permission.”

His eyes twinkled. “Very true. Unfortunately we must tolerate his presence for the moment. I need him to help Will along so that he’ll be ready to be with us again. Will has distanced himself from the idea of being a parent once more, so I need him to be ready to accept you in his life. If that means having him think about having children, then so be it.”

She squinted her eyes. “How does Mason Verger being alive and in your company make Will feel fatherly?”

“He and Margot Verger have a connection.” At Abigail’s scowl, Hannibal clarified. “Not that kind of connection. It is more akin to what he had with Beverly: siblings, if you will.” A slight misrepresentation of how their relationship went, but Abigail allowed it. It took them a while to get to siblings; Will was busy pining for Beverly for too long. “Margot is attempting to have a child, thanks to her worries about Mason Verger, leaving Will to contemplate children and feel protective over his friend. It is sad that we cannot do anything about Mason,

lest we cause more problems for Margot, but we cannot ignore him outright, else we lose access to Margot for us and for Will."

"But," Abigail interjected, politely of course. "You just told Marquis Verger that Margot was trying to have a child."

"That I did." Hannibal sounded amused. "Would it not be cathartic for Will to feel protective over someone, like he will be protective over you? Mason is a threat to Margot's life and will be a threat to her child's. It is better this way."

"You want Mason to hurt Margot."

Before she could properly articulate how messed up and wrong that made her feel, Hannibal reached out and ran fingers through her hair, leaning in with a soft hug that wasn't a real one (although she wasn't aware of that distinction consciously, only dimly in her subconscious). The physical contact calmed her rising nerves. "I want to give Will a reason to kill Mason. He will finally be ready for us then. Don't worry, this will bring him closer to us and make him ready to be your father again."

Will being her father again. That did make her feel better. Abigail supposed it didn't matter what happened to other people, so long as their little family got to be together. After all, once they were all on the same page, it wasn't like they would be staying in Orlais anyway. Maybe they could even bring Margot with them? Hannibal was good at hiding people.

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The Seekers were rushing about frantically, and Will was once again left with the impression that Hannibal must be a mage. At what point during the night did he have the time to go to the Bastion, remove Freddie's 'body', stage a display, return back to the estate, and then still have time to sleep before Margot came calling. The elf rubbed the temples of his forehead before lightly combing his hands through the side of his hair to soothe the growing headache. Hannibal Lecter was a menace to his health and safety.

The charred corpse had been slightly malleable, just enough to bend the joints. There were rips in the burnt flesh where the forced movement had torn the meat apart. The body had been made to kneel with bloodied white sashes loosely tying the legs together at the ankles, calves, and thighs. The body couldn't quite go far enough to have the thighs and calves parallel, so 'Freddie's' weight was perched on the knees, which had been reinforced with wood tied to bow string so that it wouldn't topple over. Her arms were bound behind her, also with white sashes, curving in and out between the limbs and tangling in the fingers before dangling loosely. The head was tilted back towards the sky, pleading, with the final sash covering its eyes. Attached to the throat were several bowstrings woven into a rope, hanging like a noose. Curved markings were inked into the cleaner parts of the skin, evoking halla horns.

Will thought he might be sick.

"The smell was worse earlier," Brian commented, watching him sadly. So, it appears like Jack managed to tell Brian and Jimmy what was going on in the time between their last

Freddie conversation and now. He was at least not reacting with so much fear. “There were several rotting dead hares surrounding the body.”

That only made it worse and confirmed Will’s suspicion about what the scene was supposed to represent. He shivered and tried to wish his thoughts away.

“First she’s been likened to Andraste, now this?” Jimmy asked with a frown. “I get that the previous death was mocking Andrastianism and the Chantry, but I don’t know any stories that this could draw from.”

“It appears like the killer is trying to get somebody’s attention and is close by to boot,” Jack asserted as he joined the rest of them, Alana in tow. Will peered at Jimmy and Brian’s expressions and got the message. She hadn’t been told yet. It made sense, she was already on edge and still didn’t really believe them about Hannibal. She only cared so far as it was damaging to Will. They needed to bring her into complete agreement with them first.

She stepped up, surveying the scene and then staring at him with pitiful eyes. “I don’t know if he wants to be found, Jack. He has direction. His chaos is getting more orderly. Perhaps he has a message to deliver?”

“Burning effigies and then assembling them,” the High Seeker muttered, looking suitably irritated and confused. To be fair, this is not something that Will would have predicted would happen. It seems far too ballsy for Hannibal to attempt.

“I’m sure this isn’t the first time,” Alana whispered, chilling Will. “This kind of person doesn’t just start out with this. He would have had fantasies of killing and then began translating them into action. He is building himself up or someone is doing it for him.”

Will stared at the demented figure that their fake corpse had become. “This is evoking Ghilan’nain. Her story had her punish a hunter for disobeying the laws of the hunt as set up by the goddess, Andruil. The hunter was cursed to never be able to kill anything again, which made him unable to fulfill his duties. In anger, he bound her, blinded her, and left her for dead, seeing as he could not kill her himself.”

Alana finished it for him. “Then Andruil heard her prayers and pleas for help before sending hares to chew through the binds and free her. She was still wounded, so Andruil turned her into the halla to help her find her way home before granting her godhood.” She turned back to the body, breath catching. “I don’t-”

“We found hare corpses littering the area around the body,” Jimmy said. He seemed like he would join Will in being sick.

“There’s someone that sees him,” Will whispered and everyone was listening intently. “They see him as faithful and in need of help, but he is not freed of his binds yet. He is still blind.”

Alana choked. “Someone wants to help him ascend. If I’m correct, Ghilan’nain is the Halla Mother and the goddess of navigation and guides?” Will nodded. “He’s being guided.”

“A signpost?” Jack inquired, prodding Alana’s answer. She suspected it was Will and if they introduced the idea of there being two people instead of just one… Still, Alana needed to be the one that got there for herself, not Jack.

She shook her head. “I don’t think Freddie’s killer did this. It was likely to be his benefactor.”

“Why?”

Nobody breathed a word, letting Alana take her time drawing her own conclusion. Her face broke, a sliver of dawning realization and honesty, the worst kind of revelation. “It’s a courtship,” she sighed out, the tone cracking.

Will looked away, appearing exactly like a man that had let someone see too much. He could feel her eyes tearing into his back.

“So,” Will began their conversation much later, but less than twenty-four hours after the first, feeling not nearly as confident or relaxed as he sounded. “You believe that I need guidance or are you calling me a halla?”

Hannibal was busy at his desk, keeping his books. Will scanned the pages every now and then from his perch at its edge, but nothing that could possibly be used had come up. “You have told me on many occasions that halla are proud and fiercely independent creatures that form strong bonds with others. They are not tamed, but instead they partner with others to guide them. I see nothing wrong with being compared to them.” At Will’s flat glare, Hannibal continued, “That does not mean that was the point of the gift.”

Gift.

With as much derision as he could muster, Will replied, “And what exactly was the point of the gift?”

“A celebration of your coming ascension.” Will raised an eyebrow. “Ghilan’nain went from a young elven huntress to a goddess, did she not? Andruil saw that she was so much more than the rest of elves.”

Will flatly replied, “You’re comparing yourself to the goddess of the hunt.”

“I am trying to show you that you could be so much more than the average person. No, not even that.” Hannibal set down the quill and pushed aside the parchment and then stood into Will’s space. The elf leaned back so that they were not in each other’s faces. “You are more than the rest of them, Will.”

Hannibal smelled of perfume, but it wasn’t the cloying odor that came from most Orlesians. Something with sandalwood? Regardless, the distraction was making it difficult to concentrate, especially with Hannibal’s face a scant few inches from his own. “Ghilan’nain’s ascension was a gift from Andruil: a reward for her devotion.” Hannibal’s demeanor smiled for his face until Will uttered, “Was what happened to Abigail a gift for hers?” As was the

intention of the comment, Hannibal pulled back, but Will did not allow him to retreat from the conversation. “You sacrificed Abigail. She kept your secrets as much as you kept hers, and you cared for her as much as I did.”

“More,” Hannibal responded, eyes carefully blank. Freddie had told him that blankness on a person’s face was a sign that they had something to hide, but Hannibal’s face had the careful construction of nothing on it more often than not. It always seemed that it was only free of the disturbing lack when they were together and alone. “Then again, how much has the Maker sacrificed? Your own gods?”

Scoffing, Will said, “They sacrificed the People in the end, or rather Fen’harel did it for them. To him, all of us were acceptable lambs for slaughter as long as he got to be free and the rest did not.”

“And the Maker was willing to sacrifice His own Bride to spread His word.”

A frown, carefully curtailed at the edges. Will didn’t care much for Andrastianism, but it seemed a relevant question: “Don’t you humans believe that her death brought her to your Maker’s side? Is that really a sacrifice if he got her in the end?”

“Abigail is in a better place.”

“By the Maker’s side,” Will continued blandly. “I do not believe in the Maker, but I am surprised that you do. Your prayers to him must be very interesting indeed.”

Finally an expression! The Comte’s face spread in a small, secret smile just for this moment. “I do not pray. The Maker has long since abandoned us and does not listen to the prayers of His faithful. I do not blame him; they must get very dull. Beyond that, I don’t give Him much consideration, unless it is to examine how my own acts of destruction and creation pale in comparison.”

“Destruction and creation,” Will said with a snort. “And what happened to Abigail, was that destructive or creative?” He didn’t give Hannibal a chance to respond. “What happened to me?”

“Ascension usually requires both,” was the reply that he received, and it did nothing to cool his rising frustration. The problem was that Will’s understanding of Hannibal’s perspective did not allow him to properly feel anger for the situation. Hannibal’s claws were deep in his skin and Will, despite everything, still found himself drawn in by his natural empathy.

They sat for a moment, Will trying not to allow his wildly swinging temper to get the better of him, and Hannibal not the kind of man that required words to fill silence.

“I pray,” Will finally said. It was nearly a whisper, but they were still close enough to allow it to be heard loud and clear. “For all that my gods likely cannot hear them, I pray for guidance and understanding, for comfort and determination. I prayed that I would be allowed to see Abigail one day.”

“Your prayer did not go entirely unanswered,” and the words stung and shot through him. “You saw a part of her.” And the calm that Will had been trying to reaccumulate evaporated. “Should the universe contract, should time reverse, and what was broken be made whole, a place could be made for Abigail in your world.”

“And just what place would that be?” Will growled.

“For a brief moment, you had the possibility of a child. It was a way to continue your legacy, although it would have resulted in many more problems.”

“I already had one,” Will told him, unhappy that Hannibal was stirring up old feelings and frustrations. “You took her from me.”

Then, Hannibal had the audacity to look sorrowful. “I wish there could have been another way.”

They were at the cabin again, Will and Abigail, but they weren’t fishing today. Beverly wasn’t showing up and Will wasn’t sure what that meant for him. He didn’t want to forget Beverly, but holding onto his anger about her death was becoming more and more difficult with each passing day. He had noticed it fading for a long time, but the last dregs were slowly being overruled by the knowledge that Hannibal’s actions against Beverly were entirely self-defense and not personal. His supposed love for Abigail made any action undertaken regarding her incapable of being impersonal.

It was warmer out than it had been in the last few dreams as well. The artificial sun that often was situated in dreams felt more real against his skin than before, leaving him with the impression that he was comfortable and safe. Normally, the very realization of this thought in dreams would immediately banish such a feeling, but… Abigail was there. So what if she was a demon? He was allowed to take this time for himself and he was sure he could stop her if she tried to possess him.

Margot’s want for a child had affected him more than he had guessed, and it was only made worse by the subsequent conversation with Hanibal. The noble seemed to have no concept of how much it had hurt and yet he had seemed sincere in the end. It was almost as if he actually believed that there had been no way for Abigail to still be alive, and that wounded him most of all, regardless of the truth of the matter. Should time reverse indeed… should the man have never existed, Abigail would be alive and Will would be free of this twisted torment and relief. It was the cruelest kind of fate. He remembered back to a time when he had started to desire teaching Abigail truly about his people, only it had come too late. So much regret over wanting to preserve his ways being elven and elven alone. Now, his true chance for the legacy that both he and Margot craved was gone.

“Will,” false Abigail said, drawing his attention away from introspection and grief. “You haven’t spoken once since we arrived. Is something the matter?” It was a strange assertion to make: ‘since we arrived’. Then again, more proof that this was just a spirit or a demon,

awareness of the fact that it was a dream and commentary on it. Or would it be more proof to the contrary, seeing as a demon or spirit would have chosen to linger in the farce to better appease him?

"Sorry, I've just had a lot on my mind."

"Dangerous to dwell on such things," Abigail replied. "I've learned lately that talking about one's emotions tends to help them compartmentalize or at least understand them." She sounded almost wistful and a pang struck Will about how much he had lashed out when he had learned about Nicholas Boyle. That probably had driven her more towards trusting Hannibal, even though they had made up in the end. It hadn't been quite the same after that.

"I'm grieving," he admitted. "I miss you so much that it aches."

"I'm-" she hesitated. "I'm right here Will. You don't need to grieve me."

Will closed his eyes, tears banked in his eyes even in the cusp of dreaming. "No. You're not. As much as I want you to be here, this is just a dream. You're either a figment of my imagination or a demon or spirit here to lull me into complacency."

"No, you don't understand," the young woman insisted. "I'm right here! You don't have to mourn me any longer!"

The insult was too much. "No! You are the one that doesn't understand!" he shouted behind gritted teeth and tears. "Hannibal took you from me! You're gone and it's his fault, yet here I am and I can't even sort out my own thoughts! Everything I had believed about you was false and I regret how everything turned out. Maybe if I had been there for you our relationship wouldn't have been as deteriorated as it was and maybe this would never have happened." His heart was breaking and he sunk into himself, both physically and mentally. Abigail was pushing forward, trying to comfort him, but he pushed her away. She pushed back until they were both on their knees and her arms were around him. He cried and spoke no more as she rocked them both slightly, holding their silence until the dream ended.

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Abigail woke and knew something was sitting on the precipice. It wouldn't be long before something was pushed too far and Will either fell into despair too far for Hannibal to reach or held out his hand to her father and allowed them to all be a family. Will was… her dad, her papa, or at least he wanted to be. Right? But he seemed so resistant to the idea that she was still there.

The thought stilled inside her. She had almost ruined everything hadn't she? Hannibal had insisted time and time again that it was important that she remain a secret. It might ruin everything if Will knew before he was ready and their companionship would be a fake one. He might reject her or lie to Hannibal until their relationship broke apart to be near her and then their little family wouldn't be sustainable. Hannibal couldn't find out or he might never forgive her; she couldn't make that kind of mistake again. It had simply hurt too much to see Will despondent. She rose from her bed and went to the attached bathroom to gather herself, needing to be in the right headspace for the day. Neither of her new and true parents could

know about what had happened; she couldn't tell Hannibal what she knew or the whole story would inevitably spill out oher. She wasn't enough of a sieve to let out only the helpful things.

It wouldn't matter though, would it? Hannibal probably was completely aware of how Will was feeling and would be able to comprehend the emotions. It would take some work, but they would work it out. Her biological parents always did, they even had a rule between them that they would never go to bed angry with each other, at least until they didn't any more. After all, Hannibal didn't have the issue of being obsessed with Abigail, and that had clearly been the problem. The nobleman was devoted to the both of them and the idea of them all staying together, so he would make sure that their world was repaired.

He had to. There was no way he wouldn't so the situation would clear up on its own. On the positive side, Will did admit to being conflicted about the situation and that not all of his emotions related to Hannibal were negative in nature. He might be closer to accepting them than she had thought.

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Attending an Andrastian funeral was strange, especially knowing that the person it was for wasn't actually dead. What was more odd to Will was the fact that Freddie Lounds apparently had a decent number of mourners, despite the fact that she was a bard that tended to rub most people the wrong way. Given what lessons she had been imparting to him, he begrudgingly had to admit that she could play the Game decently (at least according to his experience). Much like Hannibal, her way was a little unorthodox in comparison to the rest of the Imperial Court. It was constantly feeding false information and flouting indelicacy. Perhaps that was why so many had come; they admired a non-traditional player in the debauched pastime of death that they enjoyed, regardless of however disliked she was. He scratched down small descriptions of each person, and the sheer number was making it difficult to determine if he had already noted someone or not.

Personally, Will was still trying to figure out where his opinion lay. He didn't appreciate her approach of hiding by being obvious, nor did it work for him, but their conversations had lent him a more lenient view towards her. Not completely lenient, but more so. He still held a grudge for how she had slandered him and drew attention to his life in the Court, but she simply laughed it off as nothing personal. Nothing personal his ass.

What was doubly odd about attending this funeral was the fact that it took them a minute to decide what to do with the body. Will had burned the cadaver for the sake of making it more difficult to identify, even by blood magic, but also laying enough hints out to help the 'audience' identify him. The identity confirmation was more important though. Not that any of the Seekers would use blood magic for identification, but Will wouldn't put it past Hannibal to know a blood mage and have them check the body; he had already tried something similar. Burning has a tendency to make blood moot. Andrastian funerals, of course, involved burning the body on a pyre into ashes in a similar fashion to that of Andraste; Will had tried to invoke that very imagery as a mockery of a funeral for Freddie's discovery. They also usually involved a long chant or two about the Maker and joining his side. The body was already almost ash, charred flesh barely holding together, so it took very

little effort for them to burn the body away. The Mother that was responsible for giving the service awkwardly kept singing the chant, even after the body was basically smoldering dust.

A couple of funeral goers had spotted him, sitting away from the crowd, but close enough to the large pyre to still see. He was, however, by a small group of trees, ready to disappear at a moment's notice. The presence of animals was something he had long grown accustomed to, but it still startled him when he felt something brush up against his arm, as he had been busy studying all of the people that had arrived, filling out his notebook still. Freddie had requested a comprehensive list of the people that had attended her funeral and Will knew not a soul, which left him noting vague descriptions. She would just have to adjust.

When the presence didn't leave, Will turned to look, and was greeted by Alana. He snapped the notebook shut and packed it away. "I'm surprised so many people showed up."

Alana didn't look at him. "I'm not. She was hated, but people respected her."

"I assumed as much. Still doesn't mean I'm not surprised."

"I wonder why you're here then," she sharply inquired. "You neither liked nor respected her." He could sense her moving her gaze towards him, but stared out at the dwindling number. The priestess's chant was finally over, and people were making to leave. Hopefully he got everybody.

"Why are you here?" he asked in turn.

She inhaled deeply and released the breath through her nose. "To mourn Freddie Lounds." He almost snorted, but had a little more decency than that. "And you?"

He smiled. "There's all sorts of reasons that I would attend the 'Red Tattler's' funeral." Namely being that a) it would give Alana reason to suspect him, b) it would fit in with the pattern of behavior that Hannibal expected, and c) the Red Tattler was nosy and wanted dirt for her eventual resurrection.

"And which one is it?"

He would have to play this carefully. Alana knew that they believed that Hannibal Lecter was the Highwayman, but didn't agree. Alana didn't know about their plan to entrap him, not really, nor that Freddie was actually alive. Jack was supposed to be telling Jimmy and Brian right now to get them to stop freaking out. Jack had mentioned just before they confirmed her death to Hannibal that they would have to do this delicately and allow Alana to suspect Hannibal on her own. She already believes that his relationship with Hannibal is bad for him, and that he's going places he shouldn't be, and that Freddie's death was part of a courtship. She already believes that he had some part in it. This… this could be what pushes her over the edge. He would need to tread carefully. "It's common for a killer to revisit their victims after death. I was hoping that I could get a read on everyone, lingering spirits and such."

He could hear the Seeker-in-training narrowing her eyes. "Anyone suspicious?"

"Besides me?" Will almost laughed.

“It was implied.” He couldn’t tell whether she was joking. The gentleness from their first conversation had dissipated when she had seen his reaction to the body and the reaction with the gift from Hannibal.

“You were expecting me,” he inferred and finally turned to look at her.

Alana looked in her element. She wasn’t happy, the situation wasn’t quite right for that, but she looked determined. This was what she was meant to do, find the truth and enact justice. He was proud of her. “It’s common for a killer to revisit their victims after death,” she intoned.

He smiled. “I’m not here to dance on Freddie’s ashes, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“You seemed very interested in the crowd, but more distracted than I thought you’d be. I don’t think you were here looking for her killer either.”

He nodded, “You would be right.” She doesn’t have one. “I’m here thanks to my sponsor. He said it would be good for me to visit her, even to say goodbye.”

Alana started and then stared for a solid minute. He allowed no true emotion to show on his face, only the bland amusement that Freddie had been teaching him. It bothered her that he was so closed off. He watched, sadness pooling in his gut, as she turned and walked away. The fact that this was for the best was a shallow comfort.

The moment he could get away with it, Will made his escape. He was going to have to see Hannibal again, likely that very night. The Comte would expect it, even be looking forward to it, so the visit was inevitable. He wasn’t being indolent, just avoidant for as long as possible. So, he stormed into the house that Jack got him with such vigor that Freddie scattered to another part of it as soon as she saw him. That suited him just fine; he wanted to be alone.

He was denied this pleasure and instead found a visitor in Margot, who had come to spend time with him and help him collect his thoughts before facing Hannibal again. That meant, at least for Will, getting a little tipsy rather than black out drunk like he wished. Margot cited the fact that she had to ride her horse back, and Will knew that he couldn’t based on the fact that he needed his wits about him to deal with Hannibal safely. “Humans are ultimately sheep,” Margot slurred, more out of exhaustion than from the alcohol. “Power dynamics are such an intrinsic part of life that we flock to those with influence as surely as the sun is in the sky.” Apparently alcohol made her philosophical.

“Power is a part of every relationship, even those where deny it,” Will responded.

“We give and take power from others with our every action,” Margot replied and Will scrunched up his face.

“I don’t know if I agree with that. I hardly believe we have any agency in our own oppression.” Not that she would understand that. She’s a rich human, dealing with an abusive family or no.

“Agency is something we all have, whether we like it or not. The ability to act and to feel is something wholly unique to sentient beings.” She leaned on him, appearing somber, if not sober.

“That implies that we can choose how we feel just as much as we can choose to take a step forward or back.”

She hummed. “Am I messed up then?” Margot asked, swirling her drink. Will glanced up subtly to indicate their eavesdropper, but the noblewoman simply smiled. She was aware of the spy and didn’t particularly care at the moment. It wasn’t as if Freddie could really do any harm with what they were giving her, Will supposed.

“You might have to clarify what you mean?” Will conceded, throwing back his drink. Getting drunk sounded like a great idea, but counterintuitive. That would have to be the last one.

His conversation partner nodded idly. “For loving my brother. Am I messed up? He’s awful, always has been and always will be, but at the end of the day he’s family and I love him. What does that say about me?”

Will considered the question for a moment, trying to find the right words to say. He already was dealing with his own version of the situation and wasn’t sure anything he had been saying to himself would bring any comfort. Tapping his fingers on the rim of the empty glass, eventually he replied, “It says that you care about your family and that you care about people. You are willing to think of the value of a person’s life in more than just behavior and what they do to you. You aren’t messed up Margot, not in the sense you mean.”

She snorted. “Pretty words, but I don't think I can feel them. My heart is too badly damaged from years of being crushed under the wait of Mason and Molson. I’m not sure anybody could truly understand just how badly my own love for my brother is offensive to me. He abused me, and I still would see him breathing and living his life. Perhaps not happily, but I would want him to be there nonetheless.”

Will reached over the side of the chair and set the cup down, freeing up his hands. The slender fingers of his left hand wrapped around Margot’s wrist in a small show of support. “I’m not a lesbian being forced to live in my creepy brother’s estate where he abuses those around him, but I am a young man that was destroyed by someone they cared for greatly and now must weather the storm in the wake of the breaking point.”

A hum.

“I think I love Hannibal.”

She knocked the drink back. “Oh?” Her stare burned his innards as she put the pieces together to understand better the situation Will was in.

“He hurt me, killed someone I loved. Several someones. He abused me, framed me, and made me question the very fabric of who I am, and yet… I might love him. I don’t know what this means for either of us, beyond the fact that I wish he would do something utterly despicable so I wouldn’t be held in this liminal space anymore.” Someone shuffled on the

stairs, which reminded Will that their guest was, indeed, Freddie Lounds. He decided to cross the unavoidable bridge that was Freddie confronting him about this moment much later. "So, if you're messed up for loving your brother, what does that say about me?" Will challenged.

Margot shrugged. "It could just mean that we're both messed up."

"It could," he agreed.

"Want another drink?" Margot said and started to get up before deciding the effort wasn't worth it.

"Margot," Will said and it drew her attention to his face. He tried to portray his utter sincerity so that she wouldn't misinterpret what he was about to say. "If you need somewhere to go, anywhere to be safe, no matter what happens, you can stay with me."

She grinned, tiny and cautious, but her demeanor visibly brightened. "Thanks. I just might take you up on that."

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Mason was visiting again and, much as the manchild irritated him and the house was better off without his presence, Hannibal needed him there to continue working on him. Each moment spent together was another putting just the right words in Mason's ears. A person shifted in the corner of the room, steadfastly putting away the books without 'listening' to the conversation that the nobles were having in the fashion that servants were professional at doing. Her long hair kept Mason's gaze off of her, interested in boys as he was. Hannibal would recognize Nesiraya's careful training anywhere and kept his expression carefully pleased just enough so that Abigail would recognize it. She was learning and doing well.

His guest's fingers were white against the arms of the chair, his teeth grinding audibly. "My father was from rough stock." This he knew. Mason enjoyed repeating it several times in every conversation. "He wanted me to understand the world as it was. I remember walking among the farmers, papa's little silver knife ever ready to slip out of his clothes and into a pig's back to check the depth of fat. He wanted only the best to be served to the family and beyond. If a farmer had the pig too lean or tough, they often were flogged for the imperfection."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "Your education was an odd one."

"Those were some of the best times. The farmers glowed when papa gave their approval. The pigs were trusting little things that had been coddled to make sure that they'd be just the right size for papa. I loved listening to the squeals." Mason grinned, lips splitting apart to show teeth peeking through. "They were so blissfully ignorant."

"Part of growing a pig with fat in mind is keeping it blissfully ignorant. Stress changes the flavor and damages the mind and body. It is important to be considerate of its happiness."

Mason rolled his eyes and then rolled his tongue, words spilling out. "If we really cared about the pig's happiness, Comte Lecter, then we wouldn't eat them." Abigail glared over, clearly

understanding that this was about more than the pigs. He shot her a look and she went back to "tidying".

"What about Margot's happiness?" Hannibal asked, ignoring the fact that Abigail wanted him to ask about the farmers. It wasn't important and she knew it well; the likelihood of changing how Mason Verger treated the people in his charge was zero, and Hannibal didn't care enough to make the token effort.

Mason gave an uproarious laugh. "Don't worry about her! Papa taught me how to stick the knife only as deep as necessary to test the thickness of her skin."

"Yet you struck a nerve."

He waved it off. "Margot would love to stick a knife in me, but it wouldn't be to test the thickness of my skin." The Comte could see that Mason was genuinely bothered by this, but not by the fact that Margot felt that way. What was on his mind was that he had realized that she intended to do something about it.

"She did already try to kill you." Nudging him was far too easy.

"To a male heir confirmed as my descendent…" Mason recited. "It's a very clever loophole that Margot's found in Papa's will. Clearly, he didn't take into account how resourceful she is."

Apparently when one is a lesbian that makes them incapable of getting pregnant. Preferences do not preclude sex, especially for someone this desperate. It only made it highly unpleasant and uniquely unenjoyable. Poor Margot, having to resort to this. He didn't envy her. "Neither did you," Hannibal said, amused at Mason's obliviousness.

"I can be resourceful too," asserted Mason. "If she's not pregnant, then she will be. Margot's very tenacious that way." She already had a path and donor ready to go. She only had to get in contact and make it happen.

"The child would be a Verger," Hannibal reminded, more to dig into the wound than to actually soothe. "You would have an heir to carry on the family name. Your name."

Mason glared. "I'd have an heir when I'm dead."

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Margot had just returned to the stables and she already could feel her blood rising. They had set a date, her and her 'paramour' and it wouldn't be long before she got the chance to take her fate back from her brother. The conversation with Will had only reminded her how urgent it was that she do this sooner rather than later. Upon dismounting the horse, she waved off the groomers that were trying to take her mare away. The longer she could stay in the stables and away from her monster-brother, the better, so the lady-but-not-heiress brushed down her chestnut horse. She was a Fereldan Forder that Margot had neglected to give a name, worried that drawing attention to such an attachment would bring Mason's. The conviction was so strong that she didn't even dare say one in her head, having her thoughts flow like water

across the prospect of addressing the horse as anything (even just ‘horse’). It was something that she had learned to do young and came easier with each month.

Fereldan Forders are just as proud as the people from the land for which they are named, so even as Margot saw the reflection of her brother in the mare’s eyes and felt herself tense, the horse did no such thing. It was the quiet stillness of the horse that gave her the strength to turn around from its fish-eye distortion of the boy with whom she shared blood.

Mason was dressed all in white, the scuff of his white leather boots (and how he had managed that, she wasn’t sure) caked with dirt that didn’t spread up to his hose or doublet. He wasn’t wearing anything on his face except for a raucous grin, which history had taught her to fear. Margot made a point not to wear a mask when they weren’t planning on receiving guests. It made her seem more open to her brother who thought the masks were an inconvenient practice beyond fashion (though he still wore one constantly) and gave him fewer reasons to find fault with her. The servants wouldn’t say anything and any spies in their household were welcome to spread her reasons to their own patrons. It might garner her some sympathy, much as she disliked being pitied.

She thought he liked to see her fear of him manifest on her face. Their current interaction had done nothing to dissuade this line of thinking, as his smile spread when her own faltered and trembled under his gaze. “Good afternoon, dear sister,” he cooly greeted and brushed back some of the hair that had fallen into her face from the ride. Leaning forward, Mason gently kissed her forehead and she tried not to pull back. His fingers were twined in her hair and she didn’t feel like being jerked. Finally, he stepped back, hands moving from her hair to the shoulders in playful evaluation, brushing the sides of her arms like he was ridding her of the dust from the road. “Riding agrees with you. Puts color in your cheeks.” She frowned. “You have a bloom.”

“The winds spare hardly anyone over the plains, especially those riding.”

He chuckled. “Neither do you, but that’s not quite what I meant.”

Margot pulled off one riding glove, then the other, before removing the riding coat that had protected her from the worst of the harsh winds that blew over the plain without trees to cut them into something more manageable. “Why are you here, Mason?”

“There’s that bite.” Her reply had only made him more insufferable. “I’m here to have a conversation.”

She scowled. “Is it time to talk about what Mason wants?”

Taking her by the shoulder, Mason guided her from the stables. The horsegroom that had been studiously avoiding the both of them stilled like a deer before a hunter when Mason snapped his fingers at the boy and outright ran when the Marquis motioned towards Margot’s half-cared for horse. She sniffed while he continued to speak. “I think it’s time to talk about the future. I was lying in bed, planning out all of our schemes and ways to build up our family when it occurred to me.” She went very very still. “We aren’t doing it in the way that matters most. All nobility are concerned with heirs, but here we are and I don’t have any.”

“Heirs?” she hoarsely asked.

He didn’t appear to have heard her. “I am very concerned about the next generation of Vergers.” Mason looked over her with a half-critical eye. “Aren’t you?”

He knew. He absolutely knew. Margot didn’t have time to consider how or why, but playtime was over. “I’m more concerned with surviving this generation,” she whispered, already putting plans into motion to make it so. It would have to be tonight. Will promised that he would protect her. She could stay with him. If she moved fast, Mason’s men wouldn’t be able to get her. He didn’t know about Will; there was no way he would look for her with an elven mage connected to the Seekers of Truth.

“Our business is people,” Mason said, entranced in his own thoughts or somehow oblivious to hers. “We sponsor farmers and craftsmen, these people are ours. Nobody understood that better than Papa. Except no, for me, of course.” His grin remained frozen but a certain viciousness took hold that was splitting his lips like blood and giving him too many too sharp teeth. “Papa would often pull me away from my tutors to bring me about town and conduct my real education. He thought it was unseemly to teach you such crude things, being a young lady, but perhaps it wasn’t for the best. Maybe then you would understand.”

Her throat and lips were dry. “What a wealth of information and resources you must have in your skull.”

“Indeed.” He leered at her in a way that seemed more threatening than perverse. “I just need to share that wealth with a little Verger.”

Fuck. “‘A little Verger’?”

“Don’t you want an heir, Margot?” he almost sang, sighing wistfully as he looked off over the blank estate and past the protective invisible line that existed before the land gave way to farms. “I want a Verger baby. My own baby. I’m a vigorous young man, full of life. I think I would have a son.” He rubbed her back in a way he probably thought was encouraging. “It’d be your heir, too. Auntie Margot.”

She remained silent.

His hand continued its pattern, and Margot suppressed the urge to vomit. “Maybe a child is what we need to bring us together.”

“Maybe it is.” She didn’t trust herself to say more.

She breathed slowly when he let go, lest a sigh of relief come out. “I’ve said it before, but you’ve got a bloom Margot.” Everything tightened up inside, coiled as she was ready to dash back into the house. “Positively radiant, enough to give the Empress a run for her money. What is your secret?”

He left her on the last question, whistling as he skipped back to the house.

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By now, Will felt like he was growing used to the constant commute of hours upon hours to get back to Hannibal's home. It was irritating, spending a near day in the saddle, but it allowed him time alone with his own thoughts. A blessing and a curse, tormented as he was by the prospect of being near Hannibal again.

Unlike their previous conversation, Hannibal was a lot less confrontational when he greeted Will. Then again, so was Will. Many of the tumultuous feelings that arose in light of display Hannibal made of Freddie's fake body and the subsequent conversation had subsided. Will wouldn't call himself calmer necessarily, but more like carefully less aggressive. He and Hannibal were sitting at the edge of the desk, no liquor and no whiskey, both staring at the fire roaring in its place at the edge of the room. Will was struck by a near vision, so strong that it was almost like a spirit manifesting, of the longing that had occurred when the both of them had the intimate moment by the fireplace. The lounge where they had sat was innocuous, but now seemed charged with the very memory of their closeness.

Instead, both of them were trapped in comfortable silence. The heat of the man by his side warmed him the way the fire hadn't; the room was slightly chilled as it was night, despite it also being the summer. Hannibal had fashionably placed mirrors around subtle points in the room to reflect the fire and its light in different directions, so it gave the noble a glow and kind of life that he normally didn't have behind bland and red eyes. It was an expensive decision, something to show wealth and further Hannibal's aesthetic values, but Will couldn't find fault in it now. His revelation the other night, that Hannibal could desire, put a lot of things in perspective. For the first time since Will learned what Hannibal was… the man seemed handsome.

It was quiet, and Will basked in that. Without Hannibal saying anything, he could enjoy the moment. Of course, it never lasted very long with Hannibal. "I imagine that this has been a very eventful month for you, Will."

Will snorted. "One month ago I was still imprisoned in the Bastion."

Hannibal nodded his agreement. "Very eventful year then. How are you doing?"

The question was simple enough, but the blatant reminder of how the anniversary of Will starting to work on the Hobbs case drew his thoughts in a specific direction, likely by design. "I'll admit that I've been so preoccupied with taking a life, I'm having trouble wrapping my head around anyone making one."

"It wasn't enough of a priority to destroy your judgement with Margot," Hannibal pointed out.

"No, but I understand the urge. I was haunted once by the idea of leaving behind a legacy and how I might nurture someone in this life. Now, it's hard to contemplate such a thing."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, which was not the reaction that Will had expected. "Fatherhood is not always a nurturing role. Fathers can be killers."

"Like Garrett Hobbs," Will said and had to keep from looking for the man, almost as if speaking the name would summon him. It was fruitless; Will hadn't seen Garrett Hobbs

recently and was not likely to (at least not when he was awake).

The noble looked away. Will followed his gaze, which was strangely attached to the wall, but decided that the strange avoidance was something he would unpack later. “Garrett Hobbs was not a real father. He tried to kill his child.”

Will snorted. “I’m surprised that you feel so strongly about it.”

Hannibal shook his head, slowly and with deliberate movement. “In protecting a child, things trapped inside a man for years fly free, ready to explode in pain and dangerous behavior. Fathers that are killers do so in the name of their children, not despite them.” He turned back, back an elegant curve as he reached behind them to pull out two tumblers hidden somewhere in his desk. There was a sound like a strong pop of a cork and then liquid pouring into a glass. “MacKay’s Single Malt,” Hannibal declared as he handed Will one glass. “I’ve been saving it.” Will accepted it and watched as the glass threw the reflected light across his hands. “What sort of father would you be, Will?”

The elf imagined a different life, one he got to live vicariously through dreams. It was one of gentle days showing Abigail safe herbs to use and teaching her how to take care of herself in the world which would fight against her for being different. “I would be a good father.”

A warm smile from Hannibal nestled something treasured inside of him. He approved of Will’s confidence in himself, despite how every moment since he first told his Keeper about his dreams of spirits was spent hearing how he had to be careful of himself. ‘You can never know something,’ his Keeper had told him. ‘You can only believe and suspect that you are wrong.’ In this moment, Will believed he could guide and love someone, and Hannibal had agreed.

“Do you see a life flashing before your eyes that’s not your own?” Hannibal asked, utterly sincere. Will admitted that he did, and that seemed only to please the murderer more. “How quickly we form attachments to ideas and things that do not yet exist.”

Will sighed. “There is nothing to be attached to.” They sipped their single malt, both savoring the unspoken grief. “Have you ever been a father?” Will inquired, curious despite himself.

“I was. To my sister.”

He was sure that he had heard about Hannibal’s sister before, but he didn’t believe the noble had spoken about her for any length of time. “Tell me about her.”

Hannibal inhaled and exhaled, smile turning slightly rueful. Will wasn’t sure he had seen the man more expressive before. “She wasn’t my child, but she was my charge. Abigail reminded me so much of her.”

The reminder had hung in the background of the conversation, but to hear it so openly admitted was sobering. It detached the pleasing buzz that had been generated by the atmosphere into something more somber. “Why did you kill her?” He needed to know.

Hannibal seemed almost sad. “What happened to Abigail had to happen, Will. There was no other way.”

Tears stung Will’s eyes. It had been so long since he had genuinely cried. “There was. But there isn’t now.” He stood up from the desk and walked away from Hannibal, needing the warmth of contact from the man to disappear.

“Margot’s child may not be your own, but you are attached, despite this. Would you protect this child the way you couldn’t protect Abigail?”

Will didn’t have the energy to fight with Hannibal or to challenge him. “I still dream about Abigail. I dream that we live in a little cottage and I get to teach her everything I couldn’t or wouldn’t when she was still alive.”

Hannibal’s voice was closer than before, having moved in the time that Will took to speak. “I’m sorry I took that from you. I wish I could give it back.”

Quiet droplets ran softly from Will’s eyes before drying against his skin. “So do I,” he only said. There wasn’t anything more to say.

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The moment that dinner ended, Margot didn’t run, but she did quickly make her escape from her brother’s careful watch. After their earlier encounter, she had been so careful to pack the remainder of her belongings without being too obvious or getting his attention. Wasn’t easy work, but she managed. From there, she had a few of the servants move them piece by piece to the stables where she could quickly stash them in the travelling bags she had hidden there. It was light by regular noble travelling standards, but she didn’t have the luxury to acquire her normal amount of supplies.

Margot put on her riding clothes. She would be leaving under the guise of going on an evening ride, something that wasn’t out of the ordinary. The servants all loved her, so they wouldn’t betray her, even if Mason did anything to try and buy them out from under her. He had already proven to be false in their eyes, but her word was a bond.

What Margot hadn’t considered, unfortunately, was that Mason was capable of pretending too and perhaps could have been a shrewd player of the Game had he actually decided to apply himself. He had been observing his sister’s patterns and tells for years; she did surprise him on many occasions, but Mason knew a lot of things about his sister.

Like who was her favorite horse.

This realization came to Margot the moment that she stepped inside the unusually quiet stables to find the Fereldan Forder, proud and nameless, dead and mutilated in the floor, her stashed supplies strewn about in the dirt. Mason’s threat had forced her into action, one that he had already taken into account. Margot had only enough time to despair over her lot and how it had all ended with this when a hand closed itself over her mouth and she got a face-full of sleeping powder. Her brother stepped out from a side stall as her eyes closed, a wicked grin on his face, one of a person that had already won.

How unfair life could be with brothers as cruel as hers. Eyes wet with unshed tears closed, and, for the first time, Margot hoped that she wouldn't wake up. Whatever would happen once she did would be far worse than this.

Fate was as cruel as it was kind, though, and Margot did wake up. Her body screamed in protest, but it only came out of her mouth. Several people jumped into action once they noticed she was awake, all of them clothed in grey with aprons attached to them and masks over their lower faces. If she didn't know who they were hired by, Margot would have called them healers. She was quickly strapped down and a drink forced down her throat, despite the hands she fought against, but very quickly she found that she couldn't feel her body anymore. It had been some sort of potion, but it wasn't putting her to sleep.

One of the grey faces detached itself and the mask was removed. Mason. He leaned down to kiss her on the forehead, a mockery of brotherly affection. "Poor Margot," he sighed. "You just can't win." She flinched away, but he grabbed her chin and then delicately kissed both cheeks. This time she couldn't pull from his grasp. "I'm so sorry, sweet sister, but so long as you have it in you to produce an heir, you'll be tempted. I have to remove that temptation."

Her eyes widened. It was the only thing they could do as the numb feeling spread up her limbs and to her neck. He was- he was going to put a stop to this. The children she had slowly grown fond of the idea of one day having would be gone in an instant, and she couldn't even fight back.

"There going to find something wrong with your lady parts, Margot, or so the record will state. The healers know how to make these things permanent, but there could always be complications." The unshed tears that had stayed in her eyes earlier fell, and Margot knew it was over. "So, just in case you don't wake up again, I thought I should let you know that I love you most, dearest. And if you do, don't worry. You'll feel much better once you wake up."

Margot didn't have the energy to scream, even if she was able. All she could do was stare at the grey faces and the grey ceiling, lost in the knowledge that everything she had worked for was gone. If she lived through this, and despite Mason's words, she knew she would, he would never let her leave again.

It was over.

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Jack's frantic pace was almost impossible to keep up with, but Alana had been on her way to him to demand answers when he suddenly took off from his office. When she tried to stop him, he had hurriedly told her, "Not now!" For a moment, he hesitated, clearly trying to decide something. Then, he mounted a horse and took off into the middle of nowhere.

They went on a merry dance through the plains, not overly far from the Bastion, but it went far enough that Alana was concerned for their horses at the pace they were going. Every now and then, Alana swore she saw Jack pause and glane back to see if she was still in pursuit, but the motions were so slight it could still be mistaken for almost anything else. Nevertheless, she pressed forward.

Then he stopped. It was outside of a home, larger than most. It was roughly two stories, which was unusual for one that appeared to be humble and without anyone around it to maintain. As she followed behind him, he put a single hand up to stop her from doing so. “Give me a minute to check on something and then we’ll talk.” He disappeared inside with only, “I’ll come out to you; don’t go in.” It was very reassuring.

Jack stayed inside for what felt like hours. When he finally came out, his entire body was drooped and exhausted. All of the rampant energy that he had entered the building with had gone over the course of fifteen minutes. He didn’t say anything, just looked at her and waited patiently for her to begin.

Alana took a steadying breath. “You know, the most terrifying thing in the world can be a lucid moment.” They stared, Jack competing to see who would break first, but Alana was tired of games. “What are you up to?”

The High Seeker didn’t stop his staring. His gaze was boring into her in a strange fashion, utterly disinterested in her attempt at interrogation. “Speak plainly, Seeker Bloom.” Never had the title sounded like an accusation. “To what are you referring?”

Lacking the patience for vagaries, Alana pushed out, “I think you know very well, High Seeker. You are not fooling me, Jack.”

“I’m not trying to fool you,” he replied.

She groaned in disgust. “You’re lying. You’re all lying! Jimmy, Brian, Will, Hannibal. You’re lying to each other and they’re lying to you. This isn’t in my head.” He remained silent. “You are hiding something and this will end badly for all of us!”

His stalwart presence in front of the door infuriated her. Whatever was inside likely would answer her questions, but she was stuck out here with Jack blocking her way in. A bird came from out of the house, likely someone sending a message. “What do you believe is happening?” he asked, ,shoving at her thoughts, just like he did when he was trying to instruct her. It was condescending and not what she needed right now.

“What do I believe?” Alana snarled. “What do you believe?” Nothing again. “Do you believe that Will killed Freddie Lounds?” The question echoed out over the plains and wrangled the trees.

“I do not.”

“Do you believe that Chilton was the Highwayman?”

He could’ve rolled his eyes and it would have felt more respectful of her than the sigh he released. “The evidence-”

“Shut up!” His mouth clicked shut. “Stop lying. You think you’ve moved all of your pieces around so cleverly, but we’re not playing chess.”

His eyes glittered. “What’s changed, Alana?”

“Nothing and everything.” He motioned for her to keep going. “While I came around to the idea of Will being still a good man, the incident with Freddie Lounds left me shaken. I wasn’t sure how to feel, but I was sure of Hannibal’s innocence. I knew you all were trying something, even if I didn’t agree. I’ve read it in letters from Jimmy and Brian. But, if Will killed Freddie, then he was being guided. He was a student to a greater killer and whomever that person was had to be someone he was spending a lot of time with, by himself. It’s a courtship. And unless you suddenly became a murderer, Jack…”

He blinked and stepped aside from the door. “Come with me,” Jack commanded and walked inside.

She did.

Sitting inside, having been clearly eavesdropping and with the smuggest smile on her face, was Freddie Lounds. Her curls bounced as she skipped towards them, a picture in gaudy scarlet. “How was my funeral?” she sing-songed in the most annoying falsetto possible.

Alana decked her.

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It took a lot of convincing for Will to get Margot allowed to stay. If he had his way, Margot Verger would be staying with the Seekers of Truth and severe inquiries would be made against Mason Verger, but Jack informed him that, while the imperial scrutiny had abated, it would still be judged that there was a lack of sufficient evidence against him. They were watching the Chantry for any sign of aggression.

The moment that an unconscious Margot had been dumped on the doorstep of Will’s secret cabin, found by a shocked and even disturbed Freddie Lounds, that was the best that Will could hope for. His friend was alive and hurting

The bard had cleared off a few minutes ago clearly sensing Will’s mood, so the upstairs was theirs alone. The air was silent, any conversation that could be had interrupted by the slow breathing of Alana, still unconscious. Will had been using his knowledge of herbs and magical healing to keep her healthy, but some wounds were not physical. He knew that better than most. The rest would be vital to her recovery, and he daren’t take it away from her. Even in sleep, her hands clutched at her belly, desperate for a hope that was no longer there.

Mason had taken it from her at the behest of Hannibal Lecter and that thought shook his core with wrath unfulfilled.

He heard someone approach behind him, soft, hushed tones trying to soothe him, but none of that mattered. His friend was there, lying on the bed, hurting and not yet knowing what had been taken away from her. A scar had ran across her abdomen, shoddily stitched together and left to heal on its own. Mason knew where he lived. He was going to bring his hounds here tomorrow to guard the place and make sure that Margot was safe from her brother; it was the least he could do after letting her be caught in his war on Hannibal.

The voice approached, but Will couldn't make out what they were saying even if he cared. Margot could have died. Probably would have had he not arrived in time. Will abruptly stood, sure of his course from this moment forward. He briefly acknowledged Jack, Freddie, and Alana, before he marched out the door. All three of them had appropriately pitiful faces, but he didn't care.

He had a friend to avenge.

Rage thundered around him. Simply calling it anger did little justice to the intensity of the emotion that was swarming his limbs, dragging them forward. If Will didn't know any better, he would say that the single-minded pull he felt bringing him toward the Verger estate was akin to possession, but enough of his own thoughts and motivations were there that it was without questions. The elven mage was going into this of his own volition. Stepping onto the grounds was his point of no return. He was done waiting for Hannibal to give. Time to put this into motion.

By the position of the guards around the grounds, Mason Verger was in a barn-like building off to the side. Inside, Will could hear the squealing of pigs as they rooted in the mud. The elf sized up the humans, not interested in fighting fair as they had the advantages of size, armor, and martial weapons with reach. He only had his leathers and a couple of daggers for a straight fight, but Will also had magic and potions. Giving in to his rising energy, Will slammed a crushing prison on the first one he saw and bolted towards the other, sleeping powder prepped in hand. The second guard went down before the spell on the first faded, so Will had plenty of time to prep the powder a second time and throw it in the human's face. They only just started to break free before they went limp again.

Will prowled inside, the rumbling and rooting of swine increasing in volume. The biggest pig of them all was on a raised stage, treating the lot like their noise was the sweetest music. From the pit came the sound of whimpers and a quick glance revealed that the pigs appeared to be eating someone.

His steps on the platform seemed to have alerted Mason Verger to his presence, but it didn't bother the Marquis enough to make him face Will. "Carlo, I don't believe my sweet piggies have had quite enough to eat." When he received no response, Will being clearly not Carlo and trying to get close enough to strike without fear of too much retaliation, Mason turned around. His eyes widened in shock. "Comte Lecter's pretty thing. Excuse me if I don't offer you a refreshment."

The insult was too much. Will's swift fist met Mason Verger's face, splitting skin around the lip and nose and drawing blood. Mason was furious and his anger bloomed across his face in pinked skin and snarling lips. "I'm going to feed you to my pigs," he growled, but Will was faster than the noble's snatching hands. In one move, he had the Marquis hovering over the pig pen, screaming for his guards. No one was close enough to answer and Will let him dangle for a moment before leaning in and spitting in his face.

"I am surprised that scum like you manage to walk this work. You called me Hannibal Lecter's pretty thing, but I'm not the only one. You think it was Margot's idea to have an heir?" Rage and confusion mixed in Mason's expression. "What about your idea to take it from her? My idea to avenge my friend by killing you?" Will pulled the noble up, his shorter

stature making it so Mason was still bent backwards over the pit. Sure, the human could probably tip them both over and send them careening amongst the pigs, but he clearly valued his own life far too much. “The only thing we all have in common,” Will spat with righteous fury. “Is an acquaintanceship with Hannibal Lecter. If he had his way, you’d be on fire.” He dragged the noble up and tossed him to the floor of the platform. Mason was breathing hard and staring up at him with a jumble of hatred and admiration. Will glared in return before proclaiming, “He’s the one you should be feeding to your pigs.”

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